

Physical Activity and the Entanglement of Meaning Making for Females

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**Abstract**

This research takes a phenomenological approach through narratives to investigate the meanings females attribute to their experiences with physical activity. Nine females across the age ranges of 10-80 were asked to share three meaningful physical activity stories. These experiences could be positive or negative in nature as long as they were reflective of a meaningful experience for the participant. The aim of the research was to explore the types of physical activity experiences that females find meaningful. The results indicate that participants perceived the following to be meaningful within their experience: social support, benefits to personal health and well-being, recognition and acknowledgment, empowerment, body control, early positive experience and identity formation. Participants' stories offered an enlightened understanding of the meanings active females associate with physical activity across their lifespans that perhaps can assist in formulating and developing strategies to encourage and promote involvement in physical activity.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Undeniably physical activity has a whole host of well-documented health benefits associated with participation (Sherwood & Jeffery, 2000). Regular participation in physical activity is associated with numerous health benefits including reduced risk of: cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, types of cancer, depression, anxiety and stress (Colley, Garriguet, Janssen, Craig, Clark, & Tremblay, 2011). However, participating in physical activity is a complicated and negotiated act for females as participation is embedded within society as holding a multitude of reasons and meanings for engagement. From a young age, girls within Western society are bombarded through media outlets with images of the ideal body of femininity: flawless, lean, toned (Bordo, 1993). Darlow and Lobel (2010) suggest that most women have become accustomed to having their appearance scrutinized and that feeling physical attractive is by society's standard is crucial. Society portrays physical activity as a tool or discourse to assist in achievement of this 'attractiveness' (Eskes, Duncan & Miller, 1998). However, physical activity is also presented to females in a way that symbolizes strength, independence and empowerment (Eskes, et al., 1998). These dueling views complicate the relationship females develop and maintain with physical activity. I acknowledge these views as 'dueling' as one is most representative of an objective view focused on external approval, while the other is subjective and focused more on personal satisfaction.

**Definition of Physical Activity.** Physical activity is defined by Bouchard, Blair and Haskell (2007) as “any bodily movement produced by the skeletal muscles that results in an increase in metabolic rate over resting energy expenditure” (p. 12). However, this research refers to physical activity as defined by Bouchard et al., 2007 as leisure physical activity, “an activity undertaken in the individual’s discretionary time that increases total daily expenditure. An element of personal choice is inherent to the definition” (p. 12). This research is most interested in female physical activity and, more specifically, their intentional participation in physical activity.

From a young age, some females develop a strained relationship with physical activity, as not all of their experiences are positive (Flintoff & Scraton, 2009). More specifically, many females’ first formal experiences with physical activity occur in a school physical education setting. Unfortunately, research has shown that many girls lack confidence, feel inferior, experience inequality and oppression, and struggle to find enjoyment in physical education settings (Flintoff & Scraton, 2009). This is concerning because negative experiences during physical education have the potential to influence young women’s physical activity levels outside of the school environment (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). Physical education experiences, whether positive or negative, can serve as the basis from which females’ perceptions of physical activity are derived.

**Influences/ Barriers to Physical Activity.** Finch and White (1998) indicate that females’ perceived lack of motivation, confidence, and time, as well as a sense of intimidation are significant barriers to participation in physical activity. Self-efficacy has been labeled as the strongest and most consistent predictor of physical activity

involvement, an area in which women do not normally perceive themselves to be confident (Sherwood & Jeffery, 2000). Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as

Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with people's beliefs in their ability to influence events that affect their lives. This core belief is the foundation of human motivation, performance accomplishments, and emotional well-being. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to undertake activities or to persevere in the face of difficulties.

Whatever other factors may serve as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one can make a difference by one's actions. (p.71)

Despite the decreasing participation levels in physical activity among some female adults, research suggests that women are well aware of the physiological and psychological benefits associated with physical activity (Sleap & Wormals, 2006).

There is ample evidence indicating that the female population is at the greatest risk for disassociating and failing to participate in physical activity (Allender, et al., 2006). As such, literature focused upon understanding the immediate barriers to female participation is well documented. Research on this topic has emphasized uncovering the barriers of physical activity among young adult females. However, little research has investigated the factors that influence females' physical activity participation or successful interventions to increase females' physical activity participation (Dishman, Saunders, Moti, Dowda, & Pate, 2009). Perhaps with a more detailed and deeper understanding of the female relationship with physical activity, scholars and practitioners can begin to understand how women ascribe meanings to exercise and physical activity.



**Females and Meanings Ascribed to Physical Activity.** Weitz (2003) highlights that during the Victorian Era women were considered to be objects to men. In other words, men controlled women sexually, physically, financially and socially. This control and objectification of women, although changed over time, can be considered to have transcended across the eras and not to have disappeared (Weitz, 2003). These historic ideologies have impacted females' relationship with their own bodies, and in turn with physical activity. Females' relationship with physical activity is very much entangled in their perceptions of their bodies (Bordo, 1993). Women's embodied experiences are often complicated and complex for a number of reasons. Biologically women experience many milestones that change and alter our bodies including puberty, pregnancy and menopause (Tiggemann, 2004). Attached to these changes are ranges of emotions: joy, anger, frustration, uncertainty, excitement, fatigue, energy, and/or depression. These biological milestones change the body both in functionality and appearance (Tiggemann, 2004). The way in which females perceive their body impacts and influences the experience women have with physical activity. There are those moments where women can move with ease, grace and strength and there are times women may feel uncoordinated, weak and defeated. Females' complicated and intricate relationship with their body impacts the meanings they attach to physical activity and influences and alters the meanings of each experience.

This research focused upon investigating women's meaningful experiences in physical activity. Thus, a 'meaningful experience' will constitute an experience that encompasses any of the following:

- Implicit or explicit meaning to the participant (Drew, 1997)

- Holds significant importance and/or value to the participant (Drew, 1997)
- Stands out from other physical activity experience (Drew, 1997)
- An experience attached to great emotion (Drew, 1997)

### **Researcher's Perspective**

Physical activity has, and is a fundamental component of my life and has become an integral element in the development of my identity. Starting from age three and onwards I was actively engaged in a variety of organized sports including: soccer, volleyball, rugby, and field hockey. When I was a child, sports and physical activity were something that I considered to be fun, something I looked forward to participating in, and something in which I excelled. Throughout my elementary and secondary school education physical education was always my favorite subject. Physical education allowed me to further develop my strengths in, what I perceived to be, an exciting class that encouraged games, exercise and physical activity. My passion for physical education and physical activity led me to my undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, including a Bachelor of Health and Physical Education, a Bachelor of Education in intermediate/senior physical education and biology, and presently a Master of Arts degree in Applied Health Science.

While I was enjoying a positive and meaningful experience with physical activity I was naïve to the idea that many females had poor and sometimes devastating experiences with physical activity that resulted in a strong dislike of any physical activity and in turn physical education (Slater & Tiggermann, 2010). I experienced this firsthand during my Bachelor of Education practicum experience in a mid-sized Ontario secondary school. Through my practical teaching experiences as a health and physical education

teacher candidate I developed a realization that my passion and love for sport and physical activity was not shared by many of my grade 9 female physical education students. I struggled to understand why the girls disliked physical activity. Through my research, I learned that female disengagement from physical activity was well researched and understood. However, I was concerned that despite all the knowledge of why inactive females remain inactive, the problem of inactivity among females still persists. As a result I have decided to tackle this problem using a different approach. While investigating inactivity among females has uncovered and highlighted important barriers, I chose to explore research why active females remain active. As I reflect on my experiences with physical activity and the meanings I attach to being active, I have begun to recognize how strongly physical activity has influenced me. The meanings I attach to physical activity has encouraged me to continue to engage in physical activity, and I am certain I will do so for the rest of my life. I believe that a collection of stories from physically active women, in all stages of life, may provide some insight into the meaning making experiences that may encourage continued participation in physical activity.

I hope to explore the experiences that active women perceive to hold great meaning, and to investigate whether there may be relationship between these meaningful experiences and continued lifelong physical activity. Understanding the meanings derived from active women's experiences can provide the foundation for creating programs, providing appropriate promotion opportunities, and creating positive early physical activity experiences.

### **My Stories**

The women participating in this research were asked to share three meaningful experiences they have had with physical activity. I think it benefits the research, as well as my own understanding of the phenomena, to share my own stories.

**Story #1: One of the Boys.** I think for me physical activity has always held some sort of significant meaning and value in my life. My parents divorced when I was three years old and I spent a lot of my time living with my Dad and my older brother. I felt I was at a constant battle with myself for wanting to fit in with the boys and be rough and tough, while at the same time wanting to be that 5 year old girl that loved dolls and sparkles. Playing road hockey, basketball and baseball was a daily occurrence at our house. Each night after school my brother and I would help each other drag the nets onto the road, one of us pushing from behind the other pulling. We would grab all the equipment, and of course search for a tennis ball that was always nowhere to be found. Without hesitation my brother would look at me and tell me to get the pads on, I was going in net – saying no wasn't really an option if I wanted to be part of it all. There I was, probably no older than 5 years old standing in a net, my head didn't even reach the crossbar. The goalie pads were way too big; they covered both my legs and made it almost impossible to move. As I waddled to the net my brother and some of his friends would take turns 'warming up' the goalie, which consisted of firing the ball towards me. I did my best to stop every shot, never hesitating to throw myself in front of the ball. I remember this one shot like it was yesterday, I can still feel it in my gut, my brother slap shot the ball and it hit me right in the stomach. It was the type of gut retching hit where you want to fall over and grab your stomach. Everyone sort of stopped to look at what my reaction was going to be. I knew I had two choices. First I thought 'well this really hurts,

I'm going to cry.' Second, I could be tough and say 'what are you all looking at, I stopped it.' I knew immediately that the second option was really my only option. I knew that since I was a girl, if I cried they would make fun of me and I wouldn't be allowed to play with them again. So I went on as if nothing had happened. I could tell the guys were impressed, especially my brother. Part of me felt proud and accepted, the other part of me was biting my lip to make sure I didn't have tears streaming down my face. Growing up in this male dominated household was a constant negotiation, as I navigated between being a little girl and trying to fit in with the 'boys'. Physical activity was an area that I could demonstrate that I could be one of the boys; I could fit in. As I grew up I continued to participate in organized sport and dedicated many hours to sport and physical activity. I had this desire to be the best, and I think a lot of that stemmed from trying to get approval and acceptance from the men in my life. However, as I continued to participate in organized sport, this idea of 'being the best' transcended into all the physical activities I participated in. I had this feeling that I constantly had something to prove, and although coaches loved my tenacity and attitude, it was exhausting. I felt this pressure to constantly be better than everyone else, and if I didn't deliver, didn't score a goal, get the block, ace the serve, make the tackle, or get a touchdown -- I was furious with myself. I would spend countless hours practicing. It all started with trying to be one of the boys and to feel connected and involved with my family, and it now has become a part of who I am.

**Story #2: Team Canada.** This story holds a great deal of meaning to me because I am extremely proud of having the honour to represent my country at a sport. When I was in grade 7, I was completely amazed by the grade 8 athletes on the co-ed flag

football team; they got to travel all over for tournaments and I was envious and wanted to be part of it. Having little experience with flag football, I went up to the coach on the last day of grade 7 and asked him how I could make the team the next year. I remember he looked at me with a big smile and just said; “Practice”. My brother and I threw the football around almost every evening, he taught me how to run plays, how to defend, and how to throw the football. When the try-outs came around in grade 8, I felt I was ready. My practice had paid off and I made the team! We went to our first regional tournament and won, allowing us to advance to nationals held in Montreal, and we won that tournament as well! This meant we were moving onto the world championships in Mexico at the end of the summer. On a team of six players, I was one of two girls, and that made absolutely no difference when it came to training. We trained as equals. We trained together every week for hours; the six of us became family. We had practices at 6am before school, and then would practice again after school. Once summer started we trained every day for hours. I remember one practice in particular; every dropped ball was equal to 10 pushups. The first one dropped, and we all got into our pushup position and started to count as a team, it didn’t seem too hard. But as practice continued we realized pretty fast just how many balls we were dropping. At the end of practice I think we did close to 200 pushups; we were sore, tired and frustrated with each other and ourselves. However, there was always this sparkle of excitement in all of us, almost disbelief that we would be representing Canada, so much so that pushups, hill sprints, and 35-degree heat could not wreck our spirits. When we arrived in Mexico we were beyond excited, we walked into the stadium dressed in our matching team Canada tracksuits ready to compete. Being the only team in the tournament with girls on the team, it came to a shock

to most nations that we had advanced to the finals. I remember one of those games very clearly. The crowd was divided, half with Canadian flags and the other half holding American flags. It was incredibly hot and humid, Mexico in August – you can imagine. Before the game even began I was dripping sweat, and my stomach was doing flips. I couldn't sit still; I was moving all over the place. We had our final huddle together as a team; we had spent the past nine months inseparable, training for this game. It was bittersweet to know that at the end of the game it was going to be all over. You could feel the anticipation and pressure in each play that we ran. Although we were usually a loud team filled with spirit and energy, during this game we were all very silent, and acknowledged each others good work with a simple head nod or understated high-five. We ended up losing the game in overtime. Although disappointing, it was such an honour to play with my teammates and represent Canada. To this day I still have my Canada jersey and my medal. I found meaning in this physical activity experience through the idea of being on a team and team participation. Waking up and going to practice never seemed like a chore, I was always excited to go be with the team. This experience was so rewarding to see all the all work and dedication pay off.

**Story #3: The Lift.** I have begun to have a different appreciation for physical activity that I don't think I had when I was younger. I'm not sure if this is as a result of my education or perhaps my age, but I now find great value in my body and its capabilities. When I was younger my primary focus and involvement with physical activity was participation in organized sport. I'm now at a point in my life where my physical activity involvement is most reflective of participation in 'exercise-like' activities. Every morning I am out of the house and at the gym by 6:30 AM. I walk into

the facility saying good morning to all the familiar faces. I put in my music, hop on the bike and start my warm-up, almost immediately feeling the rush of blood to my quads and hamstrings. For me there is just something comforting about this ritual. The two hours I spend in the gym is my time and my time only. I truly value this time; it is where my best thinking happens! I am fascinated by my body's abilities to change and get stronger. There is a strong sense of empowerment when you can push more weight than you could the week before, or run a little further and a little faster than you could before. The feeling of sweat dripping off your face, the soreness of your muscles; knowing you pushed yourself a little further than before is exhilarating to me. It is that feeling of stepping up to the squat rack, you've only added 2.5lb to each side, so 5lb more than last week, to some that might seem like nothing. But as I approach the bar I know it is going to feel like a lot more than nothing. I position myself with the bar resting on the lower part of the back of my neck, grab my ponytail and pull it out from under the bar, pick the bar up and take a few steps back, gaze in the mirror, take in one deep breath, and squat down – that's the easy part! I then exhale and begin to push through my heels, moving up ever so slowly, the focus is on keeping the bar moving, if I stop it is over. Your quads are burning, your core is tightly engaged, and on the last part of my exhale I get the bar back up to standing and walk the bar back into the rack. The meaning of this experience to me is not embedded in how much weight was lifted, but the feeling and the accomplishment, 5 more pounds than last week. It is amazing to me.

### **The Need for Research**

Across their lifespan, females engage in less physical activity than males (Camacho-Minano, LaVoi, Barr-Anderson, 2011). As previously mentioned, to date



researchers have focused their attention on investigating what females perceive to be the barriers to physical activity participation, while there is limited research on the meanings and relationship females establish, connect to, and develop with physical activity.

Understanding the meanings and values that active females across their lives attribute to physical activity has the potential to inform intervention strategies that will promote physical activity and improve physical activity experiences for females.

To explore this phenomenon I believe it was essential to take a qualitative approach, more specifically I had hope to understand females' experience through the use of a phenomenological lens. The intention behind the use of phenomenology was that through the use of stories females would be likely to share *all* aspects of their experience, not merely the event itself; including such aspects as the context of the event, who was involved, how the experience resonated mentally, emotionally and physically, and what she took away from the experience. Gaining an understanding of the entirety of the experiences is crucial for understanding the meanings females place on their experience. It allows one to gain a more in-depth understanding of the aspects of physical activity that women view as meaningful and that are perhaps overlooked in other research approaches.

### Research Question

The purpose of this research was to explore the answers to the following research questions:

- 1) To what types of physical activity experiences do females ages 10-80 ascribe meaning?

- 2) What inferences can be made from the meaning women attribute to their physical activity experiences?

### **Rationale**

Investigating the meanings females attribute to their physical activity across the duration of their lives through the use of personal narratives was used to uncover insights that perhaps can assist in formulating or developing strategies to encourage and promote greater involvement in physical activity. The meanings females connect to their physical activity plays an integral role in laying the foundation for why active women remain active. Second, this research investigates physical activity stories from females between the ages of 10 to 80. The rationale for listening females' stories across their life was to gain insight on the potential evolution of the meanings of physical activity in females' lives as they change and develop.

### **Significance of the Research**

The sharing of females' stories can lay the foundation to understanding the meanings connected to their physical activity experiences. Furthermore, females' stories can assist in a deeper, more profound exploration of the potential relationship females have with physical activity, than perhaps quantitative research practices have offered. Instead of the pessimistic approach of investigating the barriers inactive females face in physical activity participation, this research takes a more optimistic and proactive approach by investigating the meanings active females attribute to physical activity participation.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This chapter presents seven sections, which reflect the existing body of literature on females' participation in physical activity; this includes 1) Theory about women's bodies, 2) the history of women's bodies, 3) Women and physical education, 4) Women throughout the lifespan and physical activity, 5) Women and physical activity today, 6) the empowerment of the active woman, and 7) the meanings women ascribe to physical activity. The earlier sections of this review focus on understanding what it means to be female in Western society, and more specifically exploring the expectations, rules and guidelines that women's bodies are expected to conform with. The later sections emphasize the role of physical activity in women's lives, first as a means through which to become accepted in order to conform to societies' expectation of females' appearance and second, as an avenue to lead to females' empowerment and redemption from previous restrictive power over women. The last section of this review will examine how women ascribe meanings to their physical activity experiences.

#### **Theory about Women's Bodies**

Johnston (2007) explains that discovering, making and communicating constitutes a full time job throughout our life and that the body is a channel in which these actions take place. As such, the body is a medium in which life is experienced; the body is the outer shell of our being in which rules, hierarchies, and metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed upon (Bordo, 1993). Brace-Govan (2002) argues that the body is a symbol

of the self, and therefore the appearance of the body and outward perceptions are representative of the worth and morality of the owner. However, men and women, and boys and girls, experience their bodies in different ways (Martin, 2003). The prevailing cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity are imprinted on the male and female body (Bordo, 1993).

Young (1980) argues that individuals' existence is defined by the person's situation, and further explains that the existence of women's body in particular, is defined by the historical, cultural, social and economic confines to a woman's situation. Bordo (1993) explains, "through a host of social mechanisms women learn that feminine women are accepted, appreciated, and respected in Western culture" (p. 311). Thus, gender performance is not necessarily a choice, because the consequences of not conforming to hegemonic gender hegemony can lead to a host of social retributions and exile (Bordo, 1993). Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, and Kauer (2004) further explain,

A woman's 'choice' to be feminine is not wholly a 'choice'; if the only women privileged are those who conform to ideal femininity, and a woman wants to garner social acceptance, then the only 'choice' seems to be conformity with the ideal. (p. 316)

From a very young age, many women face pressures to live out their existence in agreement to the definition that patriarchal cultural has assigned, that of a physically withdrawn, confined, situated, and objectified individual (Young, 1980).

Krane et al. (2004) define femininity as a "socially constructed standard for women's appearance, demeanor, and values" (p. 316). Femininity can be represented through multiple transformations and is tightly interwoven through historical context and

numerous other factors such as race, culture and sexual orientation (Krane et al., 2004).

Although multiple femininities are present in the Western world, there is a dominant, advantaged, or hegemonic, form of femininity. Rather than showcasing diversity among female bodies, the media streams homogenous images that airbrush differences and perpetuate producing and reproducing hegemonic femininity; the notion of the ideal feminine body as thin and toned (Krane et al., 2004). Therefore, through a multitude of traditional and social media outlets, women quickly learn that displaying and representing hegemonic feminine body ideals are accepted, appreciated, and respected in the Western society (Krane et al., 2004).

Schippers (2007) defines hegemony as it relates to “cultural dominance in society as a whole” (p. 87). With the term ‘hegemony’ being used to described cultural dominance, Connell (1987) offers an alternative view to hegemonic femininity as he suggests that, “all forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men. For this reason, there is no femininity that holds among women the positions held by hegemonic masculinity among men” (p.187). Rather Connell (1987) uses the term *emphasized femininity* and explains, “one form [of femininity] is defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (p. 184). Connell (1987) suggests that traits of femininity are solely constructed and in existence to satisfy men. This research will reference and use hegemonic femininity as defined by Krane et al. (2004). Due to the nature of this research focusing on women’s perspectives and views I felt it was most appropriate to use Krane et al. (2004) definition.

The gendering of bodies begins in childhood, thus making gender difference appear natural and appropriate (Martin, 2003). Young (1980) explains, “she is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous of her” (p. 153). As young girls continue to mold into society’s vision of feminine body comportment, the notion to be fragile, reserved, immobile, and inhibited is continually reinforced and perpetuated (Young, 1980). During the course of childhood to adulthood women often begin to greatly underestimate their body capabilities, and often accept and view their body as inferior to that of their male counterparts (Young, 1980).

Young (1980) states that the way in which men and women experience the body is a reflection of their position in society. Young (1980) argues that the insecurity and lack of confidence developed and fostered in the feminine body can be seen simply by examining the way women interact with the world through their body. For instance, it has been observed that women often keep their body posture in a much more closed position than that of a male (Young, 1980). Also, it has been argued that some women experience a sense of alienation and uncertainty in regards to their body and develop an understanding of the body as an object (Liimakka, 2011) because it is ‘objectified’ (Young, 1980). The values and beliefs manifested in Western society have encouraged and reinforced the notion of the female body as an object in need of regulation and discipline (Bordo, 1998). The notions which contribute to the attitude of the female body as an object are described by Rubin, Nemeroff and Russo (2004):

- (a) Women’s bodies are never fine as they are; (b) Women should be constantly aware of, and attending to, bodies; (c) Women should suppress their bodily

appetites (for food, sex, emotion); (d) Women's bodies – their size, shape, style, and comportment – are texts through which their morals and values will be read; (e) Women's bodies are objects and commodities; (f) Women's bodies exist to serve others; (g) Beautiful women are thin and anglo-featured. (p. 28)

Paquette and Raine (2004) suggest that objectification of the female body occurs when both men and women are raised to view the female body as an object that needs to be modified and shaped into the acceptable ideal. Literature suggests that often both women and men accept the idea of the female body as an object and as such some women begin to acknowledge that their body and outward appearance is a tool to gain approval and acceptance within society (Brace-Govan, 2002). By accepting objectification as normal or expected, Paquette and Raine (2004) suggest that some women's sense of being decreases, and at times allowing themselves to be '*pawns*' to men's comments. This is unfortunate because it is argued that perceiving one's body as an object produces a strained relationship with one's self and the body, which often leads to evaluating one's body from a third-person perspective (Liimakka, 2011). Young (1998) provides the example of women being consumed and fixated with the reflection in the mirror, "she gazes at her body in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it" (p. 154). When women are a spectator of their own bodies, they learn to critique, criticize, devalue and compare their appearance with that of the patriarchal feminine ideal (Duncan, 1994).

The patriarchal feminine ideal body structure is constantly changing to align with societal norms and expectations. The current trend, "tranny of slenderness" forbids women to become large and overweight, and thus encourages women to take up as little

space as possible (Lloyd, 1996, p.79). Bresler (2004) defined the current body trend for women as “taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering emaciation; it is a silhouette that seems more appropriate to an adolescent boy or newly pubescent girl than to an adult woman” (p. 67). In attempts to meet patriarchal feminine body expectations of femininity, women participate in rigorous forms of discipline and regulation in order to strive for a body resembling that of a young adolescent (Lloyd, 1996). These disciplinary practices that a women must master in pursuit of a body deemed acceptable to both to herself and society have become embedded as part of the process by which the ideal body of femininity is constructed (Tretheway, 1999).

Many feminists, through the work of Michael Foucault, explain that the disciplinary practices placed upon women produce what he refers to as the ‘docile body’ (Esques et al., 1998). Foucault (1977) defines the docile body is one that is subjected, transformed, used, regulated and improved through strict regiments of disciplinary acts. The female body is often defined as a docile body as many women take up a multitude of disciplinary discourses in an attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct the body in compliance with society’s feminine ideal. These discourses have become so normalized that they have become instilled and embedded in Western cultural hegemony (Garrett, 2004). Duncan (1994) outlines these discourses:

This discipline is constituted by practices such as exercising, dieting, comporting one’s body in “female appropriate” styles (e.g., taking up as little space as possible), applying cosmetics, shaving, dressing in constricting clothing, curling or straightening one’s hair, submitting to plastic surgery and/or liposuction, and so on. (p. 49)



These disciplinary powers that inscribe femininity on the “female body are everywhere and nowhere, as such the disciplinary is everyone and no one” (Bartky, 2003, p. 28). Foucault describes this phenomenon as the “Panopticon gaze” (Bartky, 2003, p. 42). The Panopticon gaze is a theory based upon the concept of a prison structure that places a guard tower in the center of the grounds (Duncan, 1994). The prisoners cannot see the guard and yet they behave appropriately based on the idea that there is a guard in the tower regardless of whether there is actually a guard there or not (Duncan, 1994). Many women believe that there is always someone watching, analyzing and commenting on their appearance and adherence to disciplinary discourses (Duncan, 1994). Some women become consumed with this self-surveillance in an attempt to satisfy the expectations of body femininity (Duncan, 1994). Bartky (2003) describes the ever-present disciplinary powers at play on women and consequences of the Panopticon gaze:

The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self-committed to a relentless self-surveillance. (p. 42)

These disciplinary rules are examples of the sociocultural imbalance and the dominant patriarchal power held over women’s bodies (Lloyd, 1996). Through conformity to these disciplinary discourses women’s body is experienced and perceived in society as a burden rather than something that should be celebrated, embraced and valued (Young, 1980).

### **The History of Women's Bodies**

The regulation and discipline of the female body can be traced back through history, “beginning with the earliest written codes, and continuing nearly to present day, the law typically has defined women’s bodies as men’s property” (Weitz, 2003, p.3). Weitz (2003) explains that by defining the female body as ‘property’ it reflects the ideology that women’s bodies are fundamentally different from men’s in ways that make women defective and dangerous. As property of their male counterparts, the female body has been objectified, observed and manipulated throughout history in alignment with the dominant male ideologies of the time (Weitz, 2003).

Since the late 1800s, American society has required girls and women to present themselves through their outward appearance, rather than their inner characters.

For more than a century, American culture has calculated a female’s worth in physical currency and registered her achievements through various body projects.

(p. 62)

Throughout history, expert on the sociology of the body have made it clear that the most poignant and researched difference studied between the male and female body is the principle of sex difference (Paquette & Raine, 2004). Paquette and Raine (2004) explain, “without pause, they [body experts] assumed that sex was a relevant factor, even the primary one, the relationship between anatomy, physiology, movement, and skill, as well as an individual’s attitudes during play or competition” (p. 56). With such persistent focus on the differences in the male and female reproductive systems it is to no surprise that these differences were summarized in a way that labeled the female body as limited. In the early 1900s, scientists, trailed by fitness experts (including physical educators),

used the body differences of males and females as a way to scare, limit, and negate women's participation in physical activity (Paquette & Raine, 2004). At the turn of the twentieth century messages began to be streamed through doctor's offices, media outlets and educational facilities that participation in vigorous physical activity by women was correlated with menstrual irregularities, internal damage, and troubles with reproductive health (Verbrugge, 2002). With these concerns circulating, women became intimidated and frightened of physical activity and moved away from physical activity and instead embraced sedentary roles. Wellard, Piackard and Bailey (2007) summarize this movement:

Historically, physical exertion and assertion were considered to be harmful to girls' overall development and the social understanding of 'motherhood' dictated that girls were seen as passive careers rather than as active providers. Evidence tends to suggest that many of these values still have currency today, and the early experiences of girls, which can provide the foundation for future participation.

(p.79)

Throughout history, medical opinions about women's bodies have fundamentally affected the structures within which women live (Wellard et al. 2007). This pattern has continues today, as females still encounter many obstacles while struggling to meet culturally defined expectations of their body.

### **Girls' Experience with Physical Education**

To understand the influence of physical activity upon women throughout their lives, the initial foundation of their physical activity experiences needs to be understood. Physical education may be the context in which many females have their first formal

experience with physical activity. The Ontario Curriculum (2010) explains that the aim of the health and physical education program is to “help students develop an understanding of what they need in order to make a commitment to lifelong healthy, active living and develop the capacity to live satisfying, productive lives” (p. 4). Avery, Girolami and Humber (1998) highlight the role of physical education as the primary venue through which children are educated about the importance of health and physical activity, and given the tools that assist in lifetime participation in physical activity. Once physical education becomes optional in or around grade 9, the rate of disengagement among females increases significantly (Avery, Girolami & Humber, 1998). Cockburn and Clark (2002) explain that as young females begin to disengage from physical education they are losing access to a fundamental portion of their educational experience, “they lose out in terms of their right to access the beneficial aspects of participation in sport such as health, self-esteem, and enjoyment” (p. 651). Furthermore, and perhaps most critical, disengagement in physical education can result in deprivation of women’s efforts in life-long learning and physical activity (Cockburn & Clark, 2002). Therefore, the need to create, develop and provide positive, meaningful physical education experiences for girls is imperative to reduce young women’s disengagement from physical education and physical activity.

Girls may develop a negative relationship with physical education in elementary school and these feelings can become perpetuated and magnified throughout girls’ physical education experience (Avery et al., 1998). Ennis (1999) explains that early on in girls’ physical education experience they can feel a sense of inadequacy and limited success. Garret elaborates on this idea by stating, “activities privileged those boys who

had already been socialized into liking and participating in active pursuits including running, tackling, hitting hard, shooting and scoring” (p. 229). The initial physical education experience leaves girls at a disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts (Ennis, 1999). As girls progress through elementary physical education Garret (2004) shares that girls express feeling limited by the lack of opportunity to successfully learn the ‘skills’ needed to competently compete and feel successful in physical education. This is exemplified in the findings presented by Garret (2004),

If the opportunity for the development of physical skills were not made available they simply felt set up for failure. The physical education experience became a source of humiliation, anxiety and fear where feelings of inadequacy compromised any desire to participate and significantly damaged the individual’s sense of self. (p.230)

Young girls may often begin to associate physical education with a sense of failure, in a male dominated environment (Garret, 2004).

The physical education environment is one that visibly perpetuates current trends of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity (Cockburn & Clark, 2002). Azzarito, Solmon and Harrison (2006) explain that although there has been admirable progression to decrease gender inequality in today’s education and physical education curriculum, there remains a heavily rooted overshadow of masculinization in physical education that significantly influences girls’ participation in physical education. This can be exemplified through an examination of the qualities encouraged and fostered through physical education, including “independence, assertiveness, strength, physical skill, to be physically active, and enjoy sport” (Cockburn & Clark, 2002, p. 654). While these traits are all

representative and encouraged for male participants, Cockburn and Clark (2002) suggest they are not viewed as the acceptable behavior for girls. Furthermore, Olafson (2002) examines the curriculum and reports that the current curriculum is “a multi activity skills and sports curriculum, with its regimented drill based on a European, male, middle-class, sporting model. It is a curriculum where male-defined standards of power and strength predominant” (p.71). Through continual perpetuation of a curriculum still entrenched with dominant male discourses, young women embrace the message that they are second-class citizens within the realm of physical education (Olafson, 2002).

Olafson (2002) highlights the three most prominent resistances to physical education expressed by adolescent girls, “1) the official curriculum and instruction, 2) intolerable peer relations, and/or 3) dominant cultural messages about femininity” (p. 74). Pfaelli & Gibbons (2010) have uncovered the following as potential steppingstones to creating a physical education program that fosters meaning and value in girls’ experiences:

Adolescent girls have identified that having choice and a variety of meaningful activities, such as lifestyle or fitness activities would improve physical education classes. Further, opportunities to feel successful and achieve self-improvement were also identified as a way to enhance physical education. (p. 3)

In other words, to encourage continual female participation in physical activity, physical education needs to be an environment that empowers, encourages and provides a sense of enjoyment and success (Pfaeffi & Gibbons, 2010). Physical education can viewed as a bridge to future physical activity experiences and as such it is imperative that an understanding is gained on the impact of physical education in connection to the values

and meanings women place on physical activity.

### **Women and Physical Activity Throughout the Lifespan**

To understand the meanings that women attribute to physical activity it is essential to consider female's involvement with physical activity at different points throughout the lifespan. The above section highlights girls experience with physical activity and physical education.

#### **Young Adult Women**

Young adulthood can mark a period of significant change for women, as some women are faced with a host of new experiences and milestones. This period for some women is embedded with numerous life events including “leaving home, getting married, starting to live with someone, beginning work, and starting a family” (Brown, Heesch, & Miller, 2009, p. 289). With so many significant changes and life events occurring, it is not surprising that the late teens to late twenties is the period where the greatest and most significant decrease in levels of physical activity among women is seen (Bell & Lee, 2006). Brown, Stewart and Trost (2003) pinpoint life events most often associated with withdrawal and/or a decrease in physical activity involvements, “women who reported getting married, having babies, becoming a single parent, or beginning paid work, returning to study, and changing working conditions were significantly more likely to be ‘inactive’ than those who did not report these events” (p.141). Perhaps, most noted throughout the literature is the impact of childbirth on adult women's involvement in physical activity.

**Motherhood.** Motherhood presents women with a multitude of new experiences and alterations to their lives pre-childbirth (McIntyre & Rhodes, 2009). With added

responsibilities and restricted time, physical activity becomes one of the many trade-offs associated with the responsibilities of motherhood (Hamilton & White, 2010). McIntyre and Rhodes (2009) explain that the added demands of parenthood:

Likely necessitate lifestyle changes and this may compromise the personal behaviors of parents. Onset of cohabitation or marriage may spark these changes, but the existing evidence suggests that parenthood itself may have an independent effect on parents' personal healthy lifestyle. (p. 67)

Influencing women's participation in physical activity post-childbirth is the deficiency of disposable leisure-time that was once very accessible (McIntyre & Rhodes, 2009).

McIntyre and Rhodes (2009) results propose that "over 50% of mothers who were active prior to having children were no longer meeting physical activity requirements established by public health guidelines" (p. 78). Hamilton and White (2010) explain the difficulty young mothers have incorporating physical activity into their lives, "traditional mother concepts, act as hindrance for engaging in regular physical activity as women find it difficult to construct justification for such behavior to overcome notions of compromising family responsibilities" (p. 283). Inactivity among mothers can perhaps be explained by the embedded traditional feminine social roles that still persistent today (Hamilton & White, 2010), for example, with expectations for taking care of household and family responsibilities, women have greater limitations on participation in physical activity (Bell & Lee, 2005).

Although young adulthood is reflected in the research as a time period associated with disassociation from physical activity, some research has indicated that women entering into young adulthood start to pursue different forms of physical activity that lead



to greater enjoyment and lifelong commitment (Bell & Lee, 2005). As women begin to reach a stage of independence, some begin to involve themselves with new and alternative physical activities, which can lead to a very different, and in most cases positive involvement, not experienced previously through their physical education courses (Brooks & Magnusson, 2007). Young women participating in physical activity associated participation as a tool and resource to help effectively manage stressful life events rather than with the received health benefits (Brooks & Magnusson, 2007). Brooks and Magnusson (2007) explain that “physical activity was a leisure space that enabled such stressful life events to be managed and supportive peer relationships established, by providing both a space for supportive social interactions and a place for personal solo emotional management” (p. 84). However, Brunet and Sabiston (2011) explain that young women frequently reported superficial and appearance-driven reasons for engagement in physical activity. Brunet and Sabiston (2011) highlight the following as some of the recurrent determinants to young women’s physical activity endeavors: “weight control for appearance, physical attractiveness, and social recognition” (p. 100).

Bell and Lee (2006) suggest that,

The transition to young adulthood may represent an important opportunity for health promotion, as major life transitions appear to provide opportunities for modifications of habitual behaviors including those associated with health, whereas later in adult life there is usually greater stability of roles. (p. 265)

Therefore, understanding the transitions young females undergo through young adulthood is imperative to understanding the reasons for physical activity involvement.

### **Middle-Aged (30s-50s) Women**

Middle age represents a significant time frame in women's lives because it is marked with numerous responsibilities, lifestyle and health changes. Brown et al. (2009) cite the following life events associated with this time period: retirement, birth of a grandchild, divorce, death of a spouse or partner, health changes, menopause, increased responsibilities at work and decline in personal or a close family member's health. Furthermore, women in this cohort can be overwhelmed with family and employment demands (Brown, et al., 2009). Arnold (2005) outlines the transformation this age period has undergone in the past 100 years:

The distinctive transformation of women's roles over the past century, beyond marriage, motherhood, and homemaker, greater sexual freedom, and occupational movement into careers traditionally reserved for men, is unprecedented.

Increasing numbers of later midlife women in graduate school, first time mothers in their forties, and women tasting a smorgasbord of multiple or nontraditional careers are rapidly becoming the norm rather than the exception. (p. 633)

These new positions have been transformational in changing and redefining gender roles, nonetheless they create a substantial increase in responsibility placed on women (Arnold, 2005). Women are now expected to aggressively compete in the workforce while at the same time manage family responsibilities (Chassin, Macy, Seo, Presson & Sherman, 2010). Chassin, et al., (2010) explain that "midlife is a time when multiple roles and responsibilities begin to compete with each other" (p. 39). Mid-aged women by today's standards have a great deal of pressure placed on them surrounding the execution of their roles emphasized by society. Today many women are navigating the workforce, while at the same time typically being the primary caregiver for family members (Arnold, 2005).

Chassin et al. (2010) explain the multiple roles and expectations placed on middle aged women.

This period is a time of career ‘peaking’ and of women returning to the workforce. In terms of caregiving, midlife can be a time of both parenting adolescent children and caring for aging parents. This combination of providing care to both children and aging parents has led to labeling these individuals as members of the ‘sandwich’ generation. (p. 39)

The new trending term ‘sandwich’ generation is occurring more frequently as a result of life expectancies continuing to rise, later marriage and childbirth and adult children living at home (Chassin et al., 2010). Middle age women may have a difficult time negotiating their roles as caregiver, employee, mother, grandmother, friend and partner and as such may be so absorbed in meeting the needs of others that may neglect their own well being and health (Chassin et al., 2010). Similarly, Bonsdorff and Rantanen (2011) suggest that middle-aged women are significantly disadvantaged in terms of their physical activity levels. Brown et al. (2009) suggests, “participation is constrained by women’s ‘ethic of care’, which can mean that they subordinate participation in leisure activities to family and work demands” (p. 303). As such, physical activity may not be viewed as a priority on women’s ever growing ‘to do’ list (Brown et al., 2009). However, Chassin et al. (2009) highlight the importance of promoting participation in physical activity at this age as this time period “provides opportunities for behavioral changes that can improve future physical health and quality of life” (p. 38). Engaging in healthy behaviors throughout the course of mid-life can assist in preventing health problems into older adulthood.

### **Senior Women**

Women at this age have reached a point in their life when the number of responsibilities may have lessened and they may have re-gained access to increased leisure time. However, despite the added leisure time, the research of Brown et al. (2009) has implied that this time period is not one that is indicative of increasing physical activity level. Conn (1998) explains that despite the fact that this population is aware of added health benefits “the vast majority of older adults remain physically inactive” (p. 371). Perhaps a reason behind the limited participation in physical activity is the embedded despondent life events that occur throughout this period: death of a spouse, decline in health of a family member or personal illness, surgery, decrease in income and moving into an institution (Brown et al., 2009). Furthermore, a large deterrent for this cohort’s participation in physical activity is fear (Conn, 1998). Many women fear injury that would hinder their independence, as well as the uncertainty of trying something new (Conn, 1998). Furthermore, Conn (1998) highlights fatigue, preexisting injury, and caregiving responsibilities as reported deterrents from participation in physical activity.

Although this cohort is not representative of a population that typically begins to take up physical activity, this population is representative of the importance of incorporating and experiencing positive physical activity earlier on in life. Kluge (2002) suggests “that the nature of experiences early in the women’s lives had implications for lifelong physical activity. Namely that early positive experiences- the skills acquired, support received, and attitudes formed – served as a foundation for future success with physical pursuits” (p.14). As women continue to age “active women remained passionate about their involvement in physical activity and continued to search out opportunities to keep moving, whereas the inactive women became more sedentary” (Kluge, 2002, p.6).

Conn's (1998) research highlights the positive factors that older women experience through participation in physical activity, including: a stronger more positive social life with greater opportunity to be social, increased independence, being able to babysit grandchildren and volunteer, improved quality of life, feeling better physically and emotionally, and stronger self-confidence (Conn, 1998).

Kluge (2002) findings suggest that some older active women viewed physical activity as a fundamental piece to their livelihood later in life. Kluge (2002) explains that older active women expressed that physical activity is "intricately related to their sense of well being, their independence, and who they were" (p. 15). It appears that active older women integrate physical activity as part of the definition of themselves.

Each women had an active pursuit that uniquely identifies her, the essence of which embodied who she is and what 'makes her tick'...Being physically active is an integral part of these women's lives. When they are inactive they miss it and feel sluggish, deprived, even depressed. (Kluge, 2002, p.19)

It appears that as women age they may begin to view physical activity as a more personal, self-defining endeavor than the way younger women view physical activity, as a means to superficial objectification.

Mitchell and Bruns (2011), explain that "no longer defined by society's understanding of what matters, older women have, perhaps for the first time the freedom to define themselves" (p. 124). Older women may be able to experience aging as a process that celebrates a form of liberty, freedom and experience a sense of self not connected to society's powerful grip on what constitutes appropriate female appearance (Mitchell & Bruns, 2011). Therefore, women can approach physical activity with the

sense of it being much more than related to their appearance, it can provide a sense of joy, freedom, and assists with the avoidance of health problems (Kluge, 2002). Kluge (2002) argues that older women experience a sense of accomplishment through their physical activity. Kluge (2002) explains “women find embodied experience through physical activity crucial to their well being. They received sheer ‘joy’ and ‘exhilarating fun’ from just moving” (p.18). The cohort of older women reinforces the possible need to promote, encourage and provide meaningful positive physical activity experiences at a young age to create a lifelong commitment with physical activity.

### **Women and Physical Activity**

Women may in a constant struggle to meet what society defines as acceptable, appropriate and desirable in feminine discourse. Women have often become hypersensitive to the ideal that this is a male dominated, value-driven culture and as such expect that women will constantly be evaluated based upon their body (Eskes et al., 1998). Women may pursue this quest for a culturally defined beautiful body through constant self-surveillance and limitless body discipline tactics (Markula, 2004). Bresler (2004) explains:

Women inflict discipline on themselves through surveying the defects of their bodies. They learn to monitor any changes in their body and consequently, spend considerable time worrying about their body shapes without really pondering why such an ideal is desirable or why we spend so much time on body shape. (p. 68)

One of the most utilized forms of ‘discipline’ implemented by women in pursuit of society’s ideal body is engagement in exercise and physical activity (Bordo, 1993).

Exercise has the potential to be understood as a form of discipline enforced upon women

(Bartky, 2003). Scott-Dixon (2008) indicates the concern that associated fitness, as it relates to women, is poorly defined and understood, “it is often used synonymously with thinness or disciplined adherence to a particular, typically restrictive, exercise regimen” (p. 25).

Exercise can be viewed as a practice that creates a docile body (Bartky, 2003). Kennedy & Markula (2011) argue, “the discursive construction of fitness and the practice of fitness creates docile bodies. The discourses normalize a certain body type as ideal by linking it to the looks of beauty and health” (p.13). Women begin to take up exercise as a means of looking good -- versus perhaps the more traditional value of exercise to feeling good (Eskes et al., 1998). Exercise is promoted to women with an emphasis on highlighting weight loss and improved muscle tone rather than the well-documented health benefits (Mutrie & Choi, 2000). In other words, exercise is advertised as a product; “this constructs physical exercise as a beauty product instead of a health product” (Mutrie & Choi, 2000, p. 545). Women connect the value of exercise based on improvement in their appearance as opposed to other associated benefits, for example, Markula (2003) explains “while the body is an object of control, there is very little concern about other aspects related to exercise, such as enjoyment or the social benefits” (p. 66). Scott-Dixon (2008) explains that exercise is often viewed by women as a cosmetic project used to rid women of their ‘flaws’:

In practice, fitness is frequently viewed as a cosmetic project – namely a means to purge fat, pursue a generally unattainable thin and youthful aesthetic, and erase or “overcome” any markers of physical debility or difference (including age,

ethnically distinct body features, and disabilities), as well as evidence of life experiences such as pregnancy and menopause. (p. 23)

Therefore, this view of exercise continues to perpetuate the oppressive nature of the female body as women feel they cannot be happy, fulfilled, and possess a strong sense of self until their bodies measure up to societal standards (Eskes, et al., 1998). Societal standards are representative of a very singular image,

This body is considered to contribute to women's oppression because of its singularity: if only thin, toned and young women are considered attractive in a society where women come in a variety of different shapes, then most women are considered unattractive but nevertheless work continually to obtain the desired but unattainable body shape. (Kennedy & Markula, 2011, p. 2)

Cultural messages streamed through media outlets produce images of the ideal female body (Krane, Waldron, Michalenok & Stiles-Shipley, 2001). Currently, the fit image being advertised and portrayed in society is one of extremes (Scott-Dixon, 2008). The images being streamed through media outlets are representative of a limited audience:

Either you're an elite endurance athlete (i.e. marathon runner with super low body fat and long stringy muscles!) or yoga instructors, or you're a fitness model. Fitness is almost exclusively (for women anyway) discussed as a synonym for looking good. (Scott-Dixon, 2008, p. 34)

Many women become overwhelmingly consumed with the idea that these images represent, that physical activity and fitness are tools to reach the ideal female body



(Bordo, 1993). Achieving the ideal female body becomes the focus and motivation behind participation in exercise and fitness for women.

Advertisements target women's vulnerability towards achievement of the ideal female body (Markula, 2003). Markula (2003) writes "although the text in the shoe advertisement emphatically emphasizes that aerobics made one feel strong, liberated, and free, they still pictured the ideal 'feminine' woman: hair perfectly groomed, impeccable make-up, thin, and toned" (p. 59). Markula (2003) writes that women compare themselves to culturally determined body ideals and as a consequence, exercise and fitness becomes centered on the attainment of the 'perfect' body. More specifically, Markula (2003) argues,

The aesthetics of women's bodies is the primary factor influencing their fitness choices. This is consistent with the long tradition of feminist works that explore how women are defined through their bodies. (p. 150)

Women become attracted to exercise regiments that encourage, promote and promise the end outcome of the ideal body (Markula, 2004). Theberge (1987) suggests that physical activity for women is not designed or promoted with the intent to strengthen, or improve fitness but rather to enhance women's sexual appeal and attraction. This dominant ideology and definition of the ideal body has helped put into perspective how and why women do what they do in terms of physical activity participation. Dworkin's (2001) research "results reveal that even though many women cite benefits that come from weightlifting and express the benefits of being strong, this ideal has upper limits in terms of what women should not be – bulky, larger" (p. 150). Therefore, while participation in exercise is deemed culturally appropriate in order for women to strive for the ideal body,

they are limited in the type of activity as well as the potential transformation in body type through participation in exercise.

Brooks and Magnusson (2007) have argued that we are entering into a new era of women and physical activity, one that encourages and supports the expansion of women's fitness opportunities, explaining that:

The emergence in late modernity of modified forms of femininity may allow for the possibility of greater physical agency among young women and an increased ability to challenge masculine domination of public recreation spaces. Reflected in popular culture through 'girl power' and media representation of young women who display physical prowess, stands for a new identity based on the possibilities of choice, individualism and self-invention. (p. 71)

However, despite Nike's message that women should "just do it," the dominant ideals embedded in femininity lead many women in the gym to "just hold back" (Dworkin, 2003, p. 253). Dworkin (2003) defines this problem as the "glass ceiling" on women's fitness (p.253). Dworkin (2003) further explains the glass ceiling, "women in fitness sites are immersed in an arena of continual negotiation as to the placement of the ceiling, which is in part influenced by historically shifting definitions of emphasized femininity" (p. 253).

The athletic female body is one that sparks interest, and controversy in a society still fundamentally grounded in a patriarchal dominated culture (Cahn, 2003, p. 68).

Physically active females are challenged and confronted with a unique paradox (Krane et al., 2004). Active females face the challenge of negotiating the presentation of hegemonic femininity while at the same time avoiding masculine behaviors that lead to social denial

and alienation (Krane et al. 2004). Athletic women must balance athletics and femininity, as “they face the contradiction that to be successful in athletics and exercise they must develop characteristics associated with masculinity (e.g. strength, assertiveness, independence, competitiveness), which contradicts hegemonic femininity” (Krane et al., 2004, p. 316). Society’s defined discourses of hegemonic femininity has established a paradox that active women ideally present themselves with toned bodies, yet need to avoid displaying excessive, muscular bodies representative of masculinity (Krane et al. 2004). The research of Krane et al. (2004) explains that some active women passively accept society’s defined discourses of appropriate hegemonic femininity and allow physical activity and exercise to be a repressive and disciplined discourse. However, women have the ability to actively choose how the paradox of dueling identities is lived through. As such, women can also interpret participation in physical activity and exercise as an empowering experience, which provides resistance to society’s definition of femininity.

### **The Empowerment of Active Women**

The relationship between women and their participation in exercise and physical activity fosters a complex entanglement of meanings and values. Participation within physical activity is most often viewed as a vehicle of body discipline for women, however the literature is beginning to support the notion that some women find participation to be the latter and provide a sense of empowerment. Mean and Kassins (2008) highlight that women are entering a new era that supports and encourages women’s sport and physical activity participation resulting in an increased sense of empowerment and ownership among women. This is seconded by Kenney & Markula

(2011) who argue that “sport and exercise can be a very empowering means by which women challenge themselves, gain a sense of identity, and learn their physical capabilities” (p.1).

Limakka (2011) explains “a body experience is empowering when a young women describes feeling more powerful in her body and her bodily world relation” (p. 443). As such physical activity can act as a channel to develop and foster greater confidence, and with that sense of confidence, challenge preexisting stereotypes and break gender boundaries (Brooks & Magnusson, 2007). Brooks and Magnusson (2007) suggest that participation in physical activity evokes a sense of empowerment by acting as a site of resistance to prevailing discourses that defines the female as lesser and inferior. This is also argued by Garrett (2004), who explains that as women engage in physical activity they begin to discover, understand and develop an awareness and appreciation for their body that further supports and encourages resistance to many dominating and limiting femininity discourses. Similarly, Cronan and Scott (2008) argue, “sport and leisure activities may provide women the confidence to resist pressures to follow conventional ideas about femininity” (p. 17), and that physical activity and exercise “becomes a vehicle [for women] challenging their minds, their role in society and their acceptance of societal norms and dictates” (p. 31).

Cronan and Scott (2008) argue that some women are often disengaged and disconnected from their body and as such feel a lack of power and control. Berry, Kowalski, Ferguson and McHugh (2010), showed that women have a desire to develop an understanding and relationship with their bodies and to take responsibility for both the physical and psychological well being of the Self, “a desire to take ownership of their

bodies was expressed. Each woman talked about a very deliberate wish to be healthy and to understand her body” (p. 301). Therefore, it was concluded that through participation in physical activity and exercise, women were presented with a multitude of experiences and opportunities to learn and gain a greater understanding of their body, its capabilities and limitations (Berry, et al., 2010). As women begin to appreciate and understand the capabilities of their bodies Berry et al., (2010) suggest some women begin to develop greater compassion and appreciation for their bodies. “The women described feeling strong and powerful when they exercised, which created feelings of empowerment” (Berry, et al., 2010, p. 300).

Brace-Govan (2002) suggests the empowerment experienced by women through physical activity is one that must be handled with a unique balance and attention, arguing that “women can be empowered until they take the body produced by the subject-at-work and present it for viewing as the subject-in-discourse” (p. 411). Women experience empowerment through physical activity and develop relationships with their body through movement, power, agility and grace rather than perceiving physical activity as means of body scrutiny and objectification (Brace-Govan, 2002). Cronan and Scott (2008) explain that the sense of power, accomplishment and ownership associated with participation in exercise and physical activity helps to shift women’s perception and focus away from how much they weigh or what they look liked; rather, women become empowered by experiencing and acknowledging what their bodies are capable of. Cronan and Scott (2008) findings suggest women who experienced this sense of empowerment were able to internally redefine the purpose and ideal look of the female body. Women involved in the study began to acknowledge and recognize that the female body holds

much more power and capabilities than society reveals. Cronan and Scott (2008) suggest that, “This exposure [physical activity] helped reinforce the changing story of women’s bodies as it taught them that form and function may not be as closely linked as Western society believes it to be” (p. 26). For example, women are not helpless when it comes to lifting and moving things. With training most women can be self sufficient in lifting things within reason. Furthermore, as women begin to feel this sense of empowerment and self-compassion with their body they begin to focus less on outward comparison (Berry et al, 2010). The experience of empowerment -- and in turn achieving body compassion -- led women to begin to appreciate the uniqueness of their own body, take ownership and engage in less social comparison (Berry, et al., 2010).

### **Ascribing Meanings to Physical Activity**

What remains to be understood is how women negotiate between engaging in exercise as a form of discipline that perpetuates the cycle of female oppression and finding a deeper more significant meanings; one which promotes and fosters empowerment. To understand this phenomenon, one must first gain an understanding of how meaning is created and established. Edwards (2002) explains

Meaning is created through involvement and action in relation to the world. The creation of meaning is always context specific. Meaning and memories exist in places in their ongoing interrelationships with an already meaningful environment, exercisers continually perceive and create elaborate personal reality by giving further meaning to specific situations and contexts. (p. 5)

By gaining an understanding from how meaning is established through the experience, one can gain a greater idea of how to promote, encourage and endorse a more positive

meaningful experience for women. Bulley, Donaghy & Payne (2009) have argued that by gaining an understanding of personal meanings and values associated with a particular behavior one can gain a sense of which messages are received, interpreted and assimilated.

Women may ascribe a multitude of meanings to physical activity including: confidence, achievement, enjoyment, pain, discomfort, insecurities, hard work, and better and worse body perceptions (Bulley et al., 2009). It is critical to gain a better understanding of how women, and more specifically, physically active women who perceive physical activity and exercise as an empowering and self-rewarding experience, establish these values and meanings. This is because, gaining this understanding can assist in promoting and supporting other women to achieve the same liberating, empowering and embodying experience that physical activity and exercise can create. Kluge (2002) explains through her research on the understanding the physically active lifestyle of senior women the significance of creating positive physical activity experiences, “The participants’ stories suggested that what shaped their positive experiences with physical activity throughout their lives was the interplay of external influences and persistence of their values and beliefs about the meaning and significance of physical activity” (p.20). As such, when physical activity associated with positive meanings one is more inclined to stay active throughout the course of one’s life.

### **Reasons Females Engage in Physical Activity**

Table 1 summarizes the reasons indicated in the literature as to why females engage in physical activity.

Table 1: Reasons for Physical Activity Participation

Reasons for physical activity participation	Authors
Beauty, physical attractiveness and overall physical 'improvement'	Bordo, 1993; Brunet & Sabiston, 2010; Deem & Gilroy, 1998; Eskes, et al., 1998; Markula, 2004; Scott-Dixon, 2008
Weight loss and weight control	Brunet & Sabiston, 2010; Cronan & Scott, 2008; Llyod, 1996; Scott-Dixon, 2008
Improvement and maintenance of physical health	Eskes, et al., 1998; Paquette & Raine, 2004
Social interaction and support	Brooks & Magnusson, 2007; Cronan & Scott, 2008
Social approval and recognition	Brunet & Sabiston, 2010
Empowerment, power and control	Berry, et al., 2010; Brace-Govan, 2002, Brooks & Magnusson, 2007; Eskes, et al., 1998; Liimakka, 2011; Mean & Kassing, 2008
Feelings of achievement, increased self-esteem and self-confidence	Bulley, et al., 2009; Cronan & Scott, 2008
Enjoyment and pleasure	Bulley, et al., 2009; Garrett, 2004; Kluge, 2002
Positive previous experiences with physical activity	Bulley, et al., 2009; Kluge, 2002
Physical strength and skill	Berry, et al., 2010; Cronan & Scott, 2008; Markula, 2004
Ownership of one's body and it's capabilities	Berry, et al., 2010

## Conclusion

Throughout the course of history, the female body has been an evolving site of observation, oppression, control and discipline. As Western society continues to perpetuate the patriarchal dominant ideologies and discourses that define the acceptable female body, many women continue to perceive their bodies as objects and sites of discipline. Regrettably, physical activity may become a tool of discipline and self-



punishment used to reach this body ideal. Furthermore, some women participating in physical activity and exercise negotiate between meeting what society defines as an appropriate female body and one that is *too* athletic, strong and muscular.

The intention of this review of literature was to provide the reader with an understanding surrounding the discourses of the female body and the impact of the meanings ascribed to participation in physical activity and exercise. Through gaining a deeper and fuller understanding of the construction, pressure and observation placed on the female body by society, one can begin to understand the relationship, meaning and value that females attribute to physical activity

More research is required to gain a greater understanding of *how* females ascribe meanings to physical activity and exercise. To more effectively encourage, promote and advertise physical activity and exercise to females, an understanding must be gained between the choices made to lead to either or both discourse or finding a balance between the two: engaging in exercise as a form of discipline or finding a deeper more significant meaning one which promotes and fosters empowerment. The ideal is to have females feel empowered by their bodies through physical activity and exercise and continue to engage for enjoyment, interest and pleasure.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

#### Methodology

**The Interpretive Worldview.** This research was based upon the paradigmatic perspective of the interpretive worldview. Research based in this worldview rejects the notion of objective research and accepts and embraces the idea of subjectivity within the realm of research (Patton, 2002). The focus of the interpretive worldview paradigm is not on discovering universal laws, but rather on understanding in context (Willis, 2007). A significant view within the interpretive paradigm is the belief that understanding the context of the research is critical to the interpretation of the data gathered (Willis, 2007). Understanding in context was vital to the goal of this research, as the focus was for the researcher to understand the meanings that women place on physical activity through their lived physical activity experiences. The interpretive paradigm is a methodological lens which will facilitate an understanding of how participants construct their reality, their perceptions, explanations and beliefs surrounding participation in physical activity (Willis, 2008).

This worldview also places significant value on the notion that there is not a single understanding of a particular topic, but instead multiple understandings (Willis, 2008). Therefore, I was not interested in uncovering a single ‘correct’ way of viewing the situation, but rather endeavored to identify a collage of understandings which may influence the varied lived experiences of the female participants. Each participant shared three different and unique stories that demonstrated the meanings they attribute to their

experiences with physical activity. Therefore, each story is distinctive to their life experiences and cannot be attributed to single ‘right’ meaning. The intended outcome of this research project was to explore the possible multiple meanings embedded in females’ physical activity narratives.

**Hermeneutics.** Another philosophical paradigm that connects well with the interpretive worldview is the epistemological view of hermeneutics. Cotty (1998) explains that the interpretive worldview knowledge is created by the interaction between the researcher and the researched. There was an undeniable link between myself as the researcher, and the participants that created and developed an understanding of the topic. Willis (2008) defines this connection as the hermeneutic circle, a “process of developing meaning between the topic of study, the context and our own understanding” (p. 106). The foundation of this research embraced the hermeneutic circle and incorporated the understanding of the participants as well as the researcher. This research was well placed in the interpretive worldview.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is an approach to research that seeks to answer the following question as posed by Patton (2002), “what is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person?” (p. 104). Since this research was designed to explore the meanings associated with females’ lived experiences with physical activity, phenomenology is well suited for it as the foundation of phenomenology is to gain an understanding of the lived experience and embodiment of the phenomenon, not merely the participants’ reactions to the experience (Connelly, 2010).

Phenomenology is intended to allow the reader to understand the world as it is immediately experienced, as opposed to how the experience is conceptualized or theorized (van Manen, 1984). The focus of this research was on exploring multiple perspectives and experiences of the phenomenon, and developing a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences through the use of stories (Cresswell, 2007).

Phenomenology is based upon the assumption that we must appreciate all human behaviour as an expression of meaningful experiences (Valle & Halling, 1989). As such, the phenomenological approach to this research was based upon an acceptance and value for participants' lived experiences as well as the embodiment of the experience that shaped and defined their physical activity participation.

Included within phenomenology, is a strand called 'existential phenomenology'. Existential phenomenology attempts "to explore and expose the meanings of phenomena in the life-world, the realm of day-to-day lived experiences encountered in consciousness" (Garko & Florida, 1999, p.168). Embedded within existential phenomenology is the lived body. The live body is described by Young (2005) as, "a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation" (p. 16). The female body and the experience of the lived body in each of the participants' lives was assumed to be entwined within their meanings and experience with physical activity.

**Heuristic Inquiry.** A heuristic inquiry approach was also incorporated within the methodology of the research. Patton (2002), defines heuristic inquiry as "a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher" (p.107). This methodological approach values the experience of the

researcher and allows the phenomena to be understood through the shared experiences of both the participants and myself (Patton, 2002).

Incorporating a heuristic inquiry allowed my personal experiences, reflections and insights about the phenomena to impact the research and perhaps led to a greater understanding and interpretation of the essence of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, this approach to research assisted in developing a sense of connection between the myself and the researched, as self-disclosure by the researcher was intended to facilitate trust and deeper levels of the natural, meanings, and essence of the phenomena (West, 2001).

## **Method**

This research employed the use of oral narratives to investigate and uncover the meanings women attribute to physical activity.

The sampling, recruitment, data collection, data analysis and ethical clearance are outlined as follows.

**Narratives.** This research was conducted through a phenomenological lens, to explore the phenomena of females experience with physical activity. Narratives, or stories, were used to tap into a more authentic understanding of participants' experiences (McCance, McKenna, & Boore, 2001). Denzin (1989) defines narratives as the following:

A 'narrative' is a story that tells a sequence of events that are significant for a narrator and his or her audience. A narrative as a story has a plot, a beginning, a middle and an end. It has an internal logic that makes sense to the narrator. A narrative relates events in a temporal, causal sequence. Every narrative describes a sequence of events that have happened. (p. 37)

McAdams (2001) suggests that personal narratives or stories are fundamental to understanding the meaning one connects to themselves or life events. The use of narratives in research aids in providing meaning to something that may appear to be meaningless (Gilbert, 2002). Narratives assist the researcher in finding deeper meaning in the experience of the participants. Gilbert (2002) explains that with narratives “it is not about what is said but how and why it is said” (p. 229). McAdams (2001) argues that:

life stories are psychosocial constructions, coauthored by the person himself or herself and the cultural context within which that person’s life is embedded and given meaning. As such, individual life stories reflect cultural values and norms, including assumptions about gender, race and class. (p. 101)

Narratives were an appropriate approach to discover the meanings that females attribute to their physical activity experiences. The use of narratives allows women to share the entirety of their experience, from beginning to end. Using narratives helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences and the significance of the experience as a whole. Rather than using interviews or questionnaires, which might have limited the participants’ response, stories allow them to explore the entire of their experience. By asking participants to share three meaningful narratives of their physical activity experience, I was able to explore in context what the participants valued, appreciated, enjoyed, disliked, and feel about physical activity. The emphasis on using narratives as a form of data collection was not to gain a historical account of the experience but rather to explore from the viewpoint of the teller, in the context of their lived experience of the story.

McAdams (2001) is a prominent scholar in understanding the value and uniqueness embedded in individuals' life stories. He proposes the idea that life stories are a significant component of what constitutes the individual and provides the person with self-understanding and a psychosocial position (McAdams, 2001). He argues that, "people reconstruct their past and anticipate their future in terms of internalized and evolving life stories. Thus, identity takes the form of a story with its setting, scenes, character, plot and themes" (McAdams, 2004, p. 95). Therefore, the decision to use narratives was done with the intention of assisting the participants and myself to understand and formulate a more authentic and reflective description of their experience. McCance et al. (2001) suggest that narratives are a more natural way to share information as opposed to structured interviews that can potentially limit participants' responses.

**Pilot Research.** I conducted three pilot interviews: one with my advisor, in which we interviewed each other, and two other interviews with fellow female graduate students. Conducting a pilot study assisted in developing my skills as an interviewer. Having been interviewed by my advisor allowed me to gain a better understanding on effective interviewing techniques; in particular, how to effectively probe for relevant information. Through conducting the pilot study, I learned that I needed to better explain what I meant by the word 'meaningful'. Females participating in the pilot study found that that word was vague and needed to be better explained for the research. Analyzing the transcribed stories from the pilot interviews helped me to find patterns and themes that emerged within their stories.

Although the pilot provided beneficial learning opportunities, in hindsight I should have been more selective in the participants I selected for the pilot study. Using

my advisor and two graduate students provided well thought-out and self-reflected stories. They were all able to effectively articulate stories surrounding their physical activity experiences and deconstruct the meanings embedded within the story. I feel that because of the ease and level of sophistication of the stories my pilot participants shared, perhaps I was naïve to the challenges my more diverse participants would have sharing stories.

**Participant Sample.** In order to explore the meanings women attribute to their physical activity experiences through the use of narratives, it was imperative that my participants were physically active and were able to effectively articulate three stories related to their physical activity experiences. Being able to effectively articulate a narrative implies that the participants were able to self-reflect on their experience and articulate more than just what happened, but rather explore the experience as a whole. In terms of this research, participants were considered physically active if they participated in any intentional moderate to vigorous physical activity at least once a week. Due to such specific sample criterion, it was important to this research that purposeful sampling was employed.

Patton (2002) defines purposeful sampling “as focusing on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 230). This sampling technique is designed to enhance the understanding of selected individuals or groups’ experiences by selecting ‘information rich’ research participants who will provide the greatest insight into the research questions (Devers & Richard, 2000). This approach to sampling involves having predetermined criterion that participants must meet to be



included in the study (Marshall, 2006). Therefore, for this research participants were sought who fulfilled the following criteria:

- 1) must be female
- 2) must be between the ages of 10-80
- 3) must be physically active at least once a week
- 4) must be able to articulate a story

Despite the homogenous ‘look’ of the criteria, diversity in terms of: environmental, social, race, religion and sexual orientation was encouraged and desired. However, due to ethical considerations, I did not specifically inquire about these socio-cultural aspects.

This research was to gain an understanding of the meanings of females’ physical activity experience across the lifespan who have had significantly different life and physical activity experiences. Having participants with varying life experiences created a well-rounded understanding of the meanings of physical activity in particular to these females, and the impact their past experiences have had on their engagement with physical activity.

Based on the methodology of phenomenology, the sample size remained low (Cresswell, 2007). Relatively, one female was selected from each decade of the determined age range, between 10 and 80. The age ranges of 20-30 and 30-40 have two female participants, as I felt they required more data after the first female participant shared her stories. Therefore, this study included nine participants. Participants were not all white and there was a variety in skin colour and ethnicities.

Table 2: Participant Chart

Participant Pseudonym	Age Range
Caitlyn	10-20
Jamie	20-30
Alex	20-30
Linda	30-40
Joan	30-40
Jessie	40-50
Anne	50-60
Sally	60-70
Ruth	70-80

**Caitlyn (10-12).** As Caitlyn is quite young I decided it would be most appropriate to meet at her house, as she would likely feel more comfortable in a familiar environment with her family nearby. Caitlyn was both very nervous and excited about participating. She relayed that she was unsure about what to say, and she had practiced her responses with her mother before I arrived. I noticed she was very unfamiliar with the interview process. However, once she opened up with her first story, she relaxed and her words came more easily. Caitlyn was excited to discuss her involvement in school intramurals and she happily spoke about being able to contribute just as much as any boy on her co-ed football team. This was clearly a source of pride for her. As Caitlyn talked about her decision to drop out of swimming it appeared that she was embarrassed about quitting. Her body language, i.e. looking down, tone of her speech, muffling her words, were indications of her discomfort. Nonetheless she was able to deconstruct the value she found in each of her stories in a simple and graceful manner. The simple answer of; “It just wasn’t fun for me” was offered with confidence and reasoning. At the end of the

interview she was excited to hear her voice on the tape recorder and quite happy to be part of it.

**Jamie (20-30).** I was excited to interview Jamie and felt that she would have had some unique experiences with physical activity. Jamie was born with a condition that meant her life was confined to a wheelchair. Currently focused on completing her degree, she balances her training, schoolwork and social life. Jamie has competed in the Paralympics for her country and is dedicated to training for the next Paralympics. Upon entering the room I could tell from her demeanor that being in a wheelchair was not going to be the focus of her stories. She expressed in a very determined voice that the wheelchair was merely an extension of her. Jamie relayed how grateful she was that her coaches and parents had believed in her and were dedicated to helping her develop her skills to their full potential. She mentioned that part of the reason she wanted to participate in this study was to convey that anything is possible with the right attitude and determination. Interestingly, little mention was made in her stories of her life in a wheelchair. She spoke of her training and physical activity just as any able-bodied person might. Her passion and determination to succeed was evident in the tone of her voice and the nature of her stories.

**Alex (20-30).** Alex entered the interview room prepared and confident. She sat down and was immediately ready to jump into her first story. She is a personal trainer and involved in the fitness industry. There were moments during the interview when her confident persona started to unravel. As we moved into ideas around body image and the pressure to look a certain way, I felt she was struggling with her feelings and beliefs.

There was an uncertainty in her voice as she explained the pressure to exercise and eat healthy, as if she was undermining the profession by sharing her feelings.

**Linda (30-40).** Linda is a new mom and it was evident that her mind was focused on the joy of her new baby. She came into the room talking about her baby and the exciting milestones the baby had reached. Currently on maternity leave she shared that between feedings she found some time to think of a few stories. The first story focused on her frustration with her changing body during pregnancy. She appeared, at times, to be feeling some guilt about this. As Linda opened up, she was overwhelmed with tears in her last story. She spoke to the influence her father had had on shaping her involvement with physical activity, and what a critical role he had played in her life. She shared that her father had recently passed away and that this has been a very difficult time for her.

**Joan (30-40).** An academic in the field of physical education, I thought Joan would share very candid experiences. With no nervousness or hesitation about the interview, she was very calm and said with a smile; “let’s just see where this takes us.” She shared stories of her childhood. She expressed some disappointment and sadness with her parents’ lack of interest and investment in her physical activities as she grew up. However, as her story progressed there was a change in her voice as she shared her experiences at university and meeting her husband. There was excitement, joy and passion in her voice, so much so that it made me smile right back at her. The focus then turned to her involvement with her children and their pursuit of physical activity and participation in organized sports. Despite personal health issues, she shared how valuable and important it was to her to be able to be actively involved in her children’s activities.

**Jessie (40-50).** Jessie rushed into the center carrying a bunch of bags and took a seat, huffing and puffing. She began the interview by stating, “I ran over on my lunch break, but I still want to try and make the spin class!” While talking about her upcoming marathons and tri-athlon races she pulled out a piece of paper with notes written all over, smiling and said; “I made some notes, or else I will just talk forever”. Moving into her first story, her voice was proud as she shared overcoming major physical barriers after being struck by a car. The way she spoke with such passion was captivating. She proudly spoke of how this accident had propelled her into being a champion marathon and tri-athlete. With enthusiasm she pulled out three of the medals she had accumulated. Her passion for training and her drive to succeed is summed up in her motto, ‘I train to win’.

**Anne (50-60).** An executive for a large corporation, it was clear that this interview was not unlike any other business meeting. Dressed professionally in a suit and pumps, I was the one slightly intimidated by Anne. Never really wavering away from her professional tone, she shared beautiful stories. However, at one point there was a slight change and a smile appeared on her face as she shared how she had finally accepted her body as it was. She laughed as she said she had spent over 25 years seeking a model’s body and it was only just a couple months ago that she finally grew to love and accept the body that is hers.

**Sally (60-70).** Sally was very quiet and hesitant with the idea of being interviewed. She shared with me that she had put in some thought into what she wanted to say, however she was very unsure if it would be ‘right’. Trying to ease her nerves I shared some stories of my own in hopes that it would be reinforcing and encouraging. As

Sally began to share her stories she smiled as she discussed how being physically active had allowed her to pursue activities together with her daughter. However, there was a turn in her voice and expression as she shared with me the pain of watching her mother's health deteriorate. She expressed that part of her desire to remain active was to age gracefully and hope to avoid the painful decline of health with age.

**Ruth (70-80).** Ruth is a retired teacher. Her quiet, understated voice was at first deceiving to what would eventually become a voice full of wisdom, character and humility. Laughing she shared very candidly, her thoughts on physical activity, stating, "My doctors say I have to stay moving at my age." At this stage in her life she knows it is important to keep moving, so she decided to participate in a weekly Tai Chi class. She shared that she does not want to do anything that is hard on her body; slow moving and calming activities are of most interest to her. As she reflected back throughout her life, she discussed all the physical activities she had pursued: tennis, dance, skiing, cross-country skiing and running. However, her face lit up as she talked about dance. She shared how she loved the way her body felt and how it moved so freely. I felt sad as I listened to her talk about her experience with dance, as if it was just a memory and her body could no longer move in the way it had before.

**Ethical Clearance.** An ethics application to Brock University's Social Science Research Ethics Board was submitted (November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012) and approved (December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012) prior to any contact with participants. The ethical clearance file number was 12-104 – FRANCIS.

**Recruitment.** Upon clearance from Brock University's Research Ethics Board, recruitment of participants began. Potential participants were acquaintances

recommended through friends, co-workers and family members. My email and phone number was given to potential participants by both acquaintances and myself and should they wish to participate they contacted myself via email or phone. An email transcript (appendix A) was used for initial communication for all potential participants. Once initial communication had occurred I sent the potential participant an email with the informed consent form (appendix B) and assent informed consent form for the adolescent (appendix C) and the formal letter of invitation (appendix D). If the participant was willing to part take in the research, the participant and I agreed on a time through email.

**The Interview Process.** The participants were asked to come to the interview prepared to share three stories that reflected differing physical activity experiences across their life. I suggested that these stories may be positive or negative in nature and may have occurred throughout any point in the participant's life. However, the success of this project was embedded in the idea that participants chose stories that had significant meaning to them. McCance, et al. (2001) explain that story telling or narratives are a natural process for individuals to make sense of their experiences:

Individuals, when creating meaning from experience, often organize nonsystematic encounters into coherent stories. Therefore, the use of narrative methodology is particularly relevant as it had advantage of focusing, on the participant's specific 'story', which for them is real, without asking them to think in general terms. (p. 351)

The incentive of using a narrative approach to this research was to help ensure a deeper understanding and greater insight into derived meanings participants' physical activity experiences (Riley & Hawe, 2005).

Using interviews as a form of data collection allowed me to explore the phenomena of embedded meanings within females experience with physical activity from the perspective of the participants. An interview allowed me to enter and gain an understanding of the participant's meanings of the experience (Patton, 2002). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), explain that interviews allow researchers to understand the world from the point of view of the participant, and to gain an understanding of the meanings of the experience as it means to the participants.

All interviews, but one, took place on one mid-size university campus in southern Ontario. The interview with Caitlyn, the adolescent participant, occurred in her home. As the interviewer, I was conscious of my attire prior to interviewing any of the participants. Knowing the nature of the research topic, I was aware that it would be most appropriate to dress in casual attire that was not too tight and/or revealing. I wore black loose fitting yoga pants, with a matching black jacket. This attire was selected due to the fact that it was not formal and with the intention of easing any nerves or anxieties of the participants by making myself still seem approachable and inviting.

Prior to commencing the interview, I took some time to get to know the participant by asking a series of generic questions. I hope that the introductory questions and conversation would alleviate potential anxiety associated with the interview. I then asked women if was okay if they were audio recorded so that the interview could be transcribed at a later date. The participants then shared their stories with me. As I listened, I wrote down pertinent notes related to of the stories.

The interview process encompassed a semi-structured approach to interviewing which Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) defined as, "a guide that will include an outline of



topics to be covered, with suggested questions” (p.130). The benefits of implementing a semi-structured approach to interviewing was that it allowed me to be free to explore, probe or ask questions about topics which seemed significant for that particular participant (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews allowed the women to explain the full experience of the phenomena, the key emphasis within phenomenology. The emphasis during the interview was placed on asking open-ended questions, which allowed participants to take whichever direction and use of words they would like to express (Patton, 2002).

In general, the topics within the interview included: the meanings of physical activity; primary movement form of physical activity; and physical, emotional, social and spiritual reasons for participation. The notion behind this research project was that each female had different experiences, values and meanings associated with their participation in physical activity. Implementing a semi-structured approach to data collection allowed me to probe further into topics to raise interest and emotion for the particular participant, with the intended goal of gaining a unique, rich description of her experiences in physical activity.

**Data Analysis.** Stories were analyzed in a manner that reflected the phenomenological nature of the data. More specifically, this analysis is framed in Schlegel and Noblit’s (1982) interpretive and layered approach of first “making the obvious obvious”, then “making the obvious dubious”, and lastly “making the hidden obvious”. Patton (2002) explains this as a three step process involving, “(1) confirming what we know that is supported by data, (2) disabusing us of misconceptions, and (3) illuminating important things that we didn’t know but should know” (p. 480).

In order to achieve the purpose of each layer, the following analysis was conducted. In Level 1 (making the obvious obvious) the participants' stories and interviews were transcribed verbatim. These narratives were then reviewed with the intention of identifying repeated patterns related to the women's experience of the phenomena of physical activity. This process is referred to as *horizontalization* by Creswell (2007). Creswell (2007) explains horizontalization as the process in which "data analysts go through the data and highlight 'significant statements,' sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (p.63). More specifically, horizontalization was conducted within-case (i.e. within each females' narratives individually), as well as cross-case (i.e. across all females' narratives). Patterns that were found within each individual case were then compared across case, and repeating patterns were reported. Paterson (2010) suggests that a within-case analysis can be used "initially to develop a standalone description of each case and then to conduct a cross-case comparison to identify what each case has in common, as well as what attributes about each case are unique" (p. 971). As such, after completing a within case analysis of females' stories, I then analyzed the data with more breadth across each of the participants' stories by exploring for common patterns among all narratives. This layer of analysis focused solely on the descriptive data and discovered repeated patterns from the participants' narratives of their experiences and represents an inductive analysis.

Level 2 analysis (making the obvious dubious) aimed to explore and uncover what was embedded in participants stories. Sensitizing concepts gleaned from the review

of literature were used to assist me in deductively analyzing the data for ideas that might have been implied but not actually articulated.

Sensitizing concepts are defined by Patton (2002) as “categories that the analyst brings into the data” (p.456); or as Charmaz (2003) defines sensitizing concepts, “background ideas that inform the overall research problem” (p. 256). In this stage of the analysis, Colaizzi (1978) suggests that the researcher must look beyond what was said by the participants and focus more on what is meant. Therefore, this layer relied heavily on my interpretation of the data. Through interpretive analysis of the data, themes and subthemes were created that supported and/or contested the literature.

Level 3 (making the hidden obvious) aimed to explore and uncover the phenomenological life world existential embedded in the females’ narratives. More specifically, I explored the ‘lived body’ and how it contributes to the meaning of females’ physical activity experiences.

This level included an interpretive analysis of the entire dataset to interpret what the participants’ experience of their ‘lived body’ may be. Participants did not make reference to the lived body explicitly and therefore analysis was based on my interpretation of the lived body.

**Ethical Considerations.** The first ethical consideration was that all females had the right to be informed that they were being researched and the nature of the research (Punch, 1994). Therefore, once participants reached out to me to express interest in the research, I provided potential participants with a letter of invitation that outlined why the research was being conducted, what involvement in the study would incorporate, and any potential risks. Once participants agreed to participate I provided them with the informed

consent via email. The informed consent addressed the following: ensuring participants understood the purpose of the study, the potential risks and benefits, confidentiality and who will be viewing and accessing their information (Patton, 2002). Prior to the start of each interview the participant and myself went over the informed consent to ensure that there was no miscommunication or lack of understanding. Furthermore, this process of informed consent allowed females the right to withdraw from the research study at any time, and the research gathered from that participant would be destroyed (Punch, 1994). I reminded each female prior to starting the interview, as well as in the follow up email after the interview, that should they decide at any time that they were no longer interested in participating in the research, I would disregard their stories as part of my data.

To date there are many ethical codes put in place to safeguard participants' identity and privacy (Punch, 1994). An essential aspect surrounding ethical consideration is the idea of confidentiality. The presumption was that the participants remained confidential and the use of pseudonyms was used to protect individuals' privacy (Patton, 2002). Participants were told at the beginning of the interview that their name and any identifying elements within their stories would be changed to help ensure confidentiality. I selected each participant's pseudonym. If participants requested to have their identity exposed the informed consent included a section that highlighted the risks and benefits associated with real names being reported in the research (Patton, 2002).

**Trustworthiness.** A criterion for trustworthiness is closely tied to the paradigmatic underpinning in which the research was conducted (Morrow, 2005). Patton (2002) defines trustworthiness by "being balanced, fair, and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, multiple interests, and multiple realities" (p.575). The

interpretive worldview supports, encourages and acknowledges the idea of subjectivity within research. As a result, I acknowledge that embedded within the data analysis are based partly on my interpretations.

As a result of the subjectivity of this research, there were assumptions made on the part of myself as the researcher that should be considered by the reader of this document. Firstly, I assumed that the stories females shared were all truthful and that their perception and emotions attached to the experiences were authentic and genuine. Secondly, I assumed that they trusted me and felt comfortable to share their complete stories, expressing and embodying the whole experience. To help ensure the above I felt it was particularly important to develop a trusting relationship with the participants. Therefore, I candidly shared with participants my reasons for the research and openly addressed what would be required from them as participants there was no deception. Furthermore, when participants came in to be interviewed I tried to make the environment as comfortable and reassuring as possible which was done by sharing my own stories with participants and ensuring that the females understood the process and felt at ease with being interviewed. I feel that this was helpful and allowed the participants to connect with me and view me as an equal rather than ‘the researcher’.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the research I have acknowledged my voice as the researcher throughout the research project. I openly share my own stories and experiences with readers. Furthermore, I have acknowledged that my interpretation of women’s stories is influenced by my own experiences and perceptions of the phenomena.

Patton (2002) describes transferability as the similarities between two contexts. As such, although this research interviewed women of varying ages, social class and

ethnicities, each story is reflective of a personal and unique experience. According to Patton (2002) “explorations are modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to together situations under similar, but not identical, conditions” (p. 584). This means that the experiences of other females may be similar to those of the participants in this sample, however, they will not be identical and therefore these results are reflective only of these females’ experience.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the findings established through the data collection and analysis phase in relation to the following research questions outlined in Chapter 1.

1. To what types of physical activity experiences do females ages 10-80 ascribe meaning?
2. What inferences can be made from the meaning females attribute to their physical activity experiences?

As outlined in the methods in Chapter Three, data analysis and results will be presented using a three-tier process outlined by Patton (2002) as: making the obvious obvious, making the obvious dubious and making the hidden obvious. The initial level of analysis highlights the recurring themes embedded in each of the participant's narrative. The second level of analysis presents that which the participants did not explicitly say but rather what the researcher infers from what was said. The third and final level of data analysis highlights the 'unsaid', thereby focusing on what was absent in the participants' stories.

**Table 3: *Level of Data Analysis***

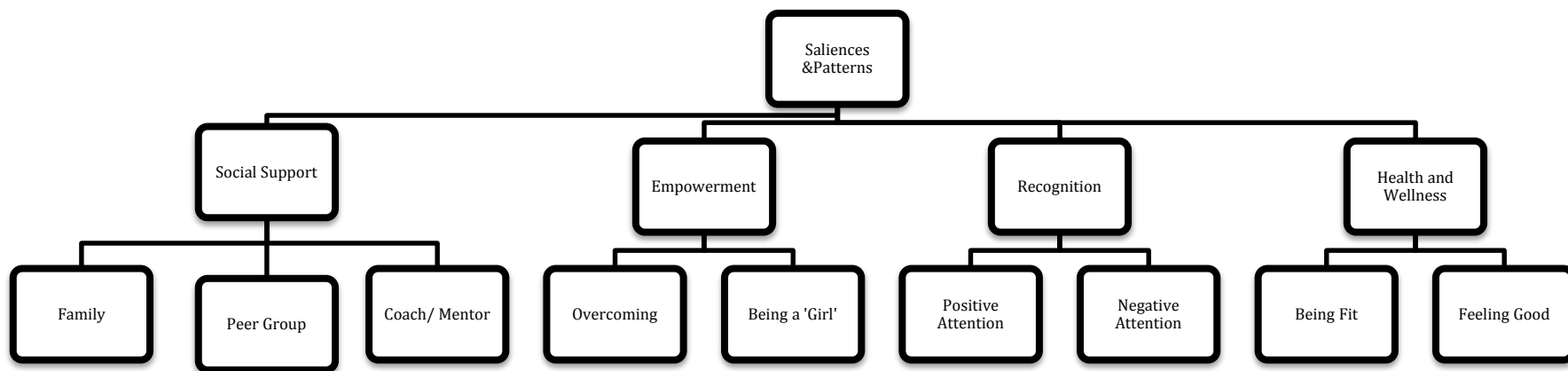
<b>Layer 1 – Making the Obvious Obvious</b>	
<b>Purpose</b>	Identifying repeated patterns related to participants' experience of the phenomena of physical activity
<b>Method</b>	Data analysis for repeated patterns within case and cross case
<b>Results</b>	<b>Social Support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Peer Groups</li> <li>• Mentor/Coach</li> </ul> <b>Empowerment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcoming Challenges</li> <li>• Being a 'girl'</li> </ul> <b>Recognition</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive Attention</li> <li>• Negative Attention</li> </ul> <b>Health and Wellness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being Fit</li> <li>• Feeling Good</li> </ul>



<b>Layer 2 – Making the Obvious Dubious</b>	
<b>Purpose</b>	Data analysis using sensitizing concepts of the phenomena grounded through the research literature review.
<b>Method</b>	Interpretive analysis of the data by the researcher, themes and subthemes were created that supported and/or contested the literature.
<b>Results</b>	<p><b>Control</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Among participants there was an underlying sense that physical activity and exercise was being used as a form of discipline, or as a tool to control one's body in terms of external appearance.</li> </ul> <p><b>Power of the Experience</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing the females' stories it became evident that through positive experiences with physical activity they associated greater values and meanings to physical activity.</li> </ul> <p><b>Active Start</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All participants in the study led an active lifestyle from childhood and onwards.</li> </ul> <p><b>Socio Economic Status</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Females' SES plays a significant role in the type of experiences they have with physical activity and as such the meanings they attach to those experiences.</li> </ul>

<b>Level 3 – Making the Hidden Obvious</b>	
<b>Purpose</b>	Illuminate the unarticulated and hidden thought that may drive the explicit and obvious statements
<b>Method</b>	An interpretive analysis of the entire dataset to interpret what the females’ experience of their ‘lived body’ may be.
<b>Results</b>	Despite the overwhelming presence of the body in womens’ everyday world there was a lack of a voice of the body in the females’ stories.

**Figure 1: Level One – Patterns**



### Level 1 Distillation

This level of analysis began with a within case analysis of each participant's story, where I searched for repeated patterns and saliences as they related to the research question. I then analyzed data with more breadth across all of the participants' stories and looked for common patterns and saliences. This approach presents indigenous concepts from the participants and represents an inductive analysis. This level of research intends to present the descriptive data; presented below are the saliences and patterns.

#### Social Support

Perhaps the most frequently referenced item in the sharing of participants' stories was the significance of social support in creating a meaningful physical activity experience. On some level, a reference to a social outlet whether that be family, peer group, or coach and/or mentor was discussed by all women. All participants shared at least one story in which the presence of another person, or group of people, was emphasized and influenced their experiences. Participants reported that social interaction and support enhanced the meanings of their experience positively and as result encouraged continued participation.

**Family.** Many participants discussed the influence that family support had on their participation in physical activity. For some it was the initial and guiding force that led them into their pursuit of a lifelong active lifestyle. Jessie shares that her father played a significant role in her initial relationship with physical activity:

*I've always been involved in sport and my father was excellent, a very athletic man and I think I've taken after him. He would be there driving me forward. So*

*my father helped a lot in the process in the younger years, but it's in me to do well. (Jessie 40-50)*

For many participants, involvement in sport and physical activity as children was encouraged and reinforced as important through family members. For example, “*My dad worked all the time, but what he like best was being physically active. So slowly he started to bring me for bike rides and walks and eventually into running*” (Alex, 20-30). Most participants shared that activity had been a part of their life from childhood as a result of their parents’ active role in encouraging and supporting physical activity.

The older participants shared stories that continued to reflect the important role of family, however; more emphasis was on the important role a supportive partner plays in a woman’s continued pursuit of an active lifestyle. Jessie explains that the support of her husband and children assists in maintaining her dedication to leading an active lifestyle:

*I mean for lots of women out there you are a mom first, or a wife. These things are selfish if you go and do them, you feel like you shouldn't be. But with proper support from your family I think you can overcome that. My husband has assured me that everything is under control. I get that push from him, which makes me feel that it is okay. (Anne, 50-60)*

**Peer Group.** Many participants expressed that their peers with whom they shared physical activity experiences with were a major influence on their continued participation. For example, Sally (60-70) explains, “*It's the social that keeps me going*”. In fact, many participants discussed the social network they had created and developed through participation in a particular activity had become one of the primary reasons for continued participation. Some explained that the ritual and routine that had developed

among their peer group over the years was something they looked forward to and acted as a significant motivator for their activity. Sally explains that a significant part of her participation in triathlons is the relationships built among participants, *“Racing was a lot of fun, you got to know a lot of people through the race and get a bunch of friends. It becomes its own social scene”* (Sally, 60-70). It appears that the impact of a positive social network allowed women to socialize and relate with other participants who shared a similar passion, enjoyment and understanding of the significance and importance of physical activity in their lives.

The most commonly shared influence of making a physical activity experience meaningful was the significance and positive nature of peers’ social influence. However, a few participants did share negative experiences resulting from negative social interactions. Most negative social peer interactions occurred when the participants were younger. Caitlyn explains that not fitting in with the social scene at swimming lessons was enough to cause her to quit; she explains, *“I didn’t really like swimming because everyone was older than me and no one would talk to me. And I didn’t really enjoy it so I quit”* (Caitlyn, 10-20). A common theme was noticed among those who reported negative social physical activity experiences, all of which were related to participation in a physical activity that was not age appropriate. Jamie shares,

*I was swimming with children twice my age and during the lesson they were using vocabulary that was beyond my comprehension and so it was very intimidating for me because I didn’t always understand what they were trying to teach me. Also, I didn’t really make any friends, so that was hard.* (Jamie, 20-30)

Negative peer interaction seemed most significant when the participant felt out of place and lacking, and as a result was unable to build a social network while engaging in physical activity. Linda shares her experience with swimming lessons growing up and the pain associated with not fitting in,

*Because I was swimming so much I had to cut my hair really, really short and so I was getting teased and bullied from people calling me a boy. It was a rough couple of years and because I found it too difficult to keep up with instruction and I had no friends it was just a negative experience. I just wanted to quit (Linda, 30-40).*

**Coach or mentor support.** A significant figure that participants identified was the influence of a coach and or mentor's involvement in their physical activity. For many participants, it was not the role that the coach played in teaching and executing skills that was meaningful to them, but rather the encouragement and belief in their ability to be successful. Jamie expressed that her coach's support and encouragement held significance to her development as an athlete, she explains, *"My coach saw potential in me. So that really furthered sport in my life. It really meant a lot to me that he saw the potential in me"* (Jamie 20-30). Some participants expressed that having a figure of 'authority' recognize, appreciate, encourage and support their participation in physical activity and sport held great significance and meaning.

## **Empowerment**

Liimakka (2011) explains "a body experience that is empowering is when a young woman describes feeling more powerful in her body and her bodily world relation" (p. 443). Participants expressed that the physical activity experiences that held significant

meaning to them involved a sense of personal empowerment and strength achieved through physical activity. A few participants used physical activity as an outlet to overcome obstacles and challenges in their lives including, physical, mental and emotional.

**Overcoming challenges.** Some participants found meaning in their ability to overcome personal obstacles through physical activity. Jessie shares her story of being hit by a car,

*I've been running for a long time and I was out on the road running near my home in February and I got hit by a car and this was a big life turning event for me because I was out running in the winter, but I was running on the wrong side of the road. Someone hit me under the light; it was a really good impact and left me unconscious in the ditch. They took me to the hospital and I was unconscious for 4 days, 250 staples in my head, smashed my ankle and my other leg was lacerated. (Jessie, 40-50)*

Jessie shares that it was her tenacity and commitment to physical activity that gave her the drive to overcome it,

*I mean I really believed; "If there is a will there is way". With stubbornness and a lot of swimming that's what got me where I am today. I almost have full flexion in my foot back-which they never thought would happen – and I got it back which allowed me to take my next step which is what I always wanted to do, triathlons. (Jessie, 40-50)*



Participants expressed that it was not the act of being active that held meaning, but rather the feeling of inner strength in their persistence to overcome challenges. Jamie shares her experience of competing in the Paralympics,

*I knew that I could get to that level. But when I really qualified I was amazed that I actually did it. I always knew I could, but it was just that moment where you are like, ok it happened! So I think it had just been amazing. I just hope others follow in my footsteps because that is one of my main goals is to always help people.*

*(Jamie, 20-30)*

One participant, Joan spoke to both the physical and mental challenges and the pursuit to overcome them:

*It's been quite a struggle. The last little while there has been these monstrous blocks, 5 herniated discs in my cervical spin – never to run again, never to jump again, no biking, swimming just on my back. Yes, it's a physical thing and yes I have worked to overcome it. But it's also a psychological effect. It's getting over that hurdle that is challenging. (Joan, 30-40)*

Participants shared stories of their tenacity in overcoming physical limitations; despite the fact that they were once told they would not be able to overcome. For these participants, they found meaning in their continued pursuit, determination, and their refusal to believe that 'no' was the only answer. Some women used physical activity purposefully as a way to add meaning to their lives despite injury. Physical activity was sought out perhaps as a way to assert themselves.

**Being a girl.** The idea of being a female competing in the male dominated world of physical activity and sport was an idea that some participants revealed in their stories.

The idea of ‘being a girl’ is bifurcated, as it can be viewed as positive and/or negative. Some participants found meaning in their empowerment and strength of being a female and breaking the stigma of women and sport. Caitlyn shares a story:

*I was nervous to compete against boys because of course boys are intimidating and they think they are so much better. But I had a great run and ended up kicking their butts! It was a huge accomplishment because I proved to myself that could beat the guys, who always talked down to us. (Caitlyn, 10-20)*

Participants shared that they experienced inner and outer strength achieved through physical activity. Participants spoke to the idea of empowerment through physical strength and breaking the mold of being a ‘weak girl’. Ruth explains, “*I came to realize I didn’t need a man to do the lifting, I was capable on my own*” (Ruth, 70-80).

On the other hand, a few participants expressed meaning in the idea that ‘being a girl’ and participating in physical activity or sport made them feel weaker and more vulnerable. Alex shares her story of playing squash against a male competitor,

*It was a pretty even matched game, point for point. I had gone up against guys before but there was something different in the intensity of this game. It was like we both had something to prove. The last match, I was up by 2 points. It was my serve for match point. I served it, killed it, smashed it, right into the corner – it was an ace! Laughing and celebrating I jumped up and down. He just looked at me, yelled ‘F\*\*\* you’ and threw his racket across the court, and stormed out of the court. I stood there absolutely shocked; I wasn’t really sure what to do. I picked up my things and walked out of the court. It is a shame, because going forward I refused to ever play against that person, when I play against males I*

*always ask, half joking 'if I beat you, you aren't going to throw a tantrum, are you?' This game really changed the way I thought about competition against men. I was almost fearful to win (Alex, 20-30).*

A lot of participants connected with this vulnerability in experiences that involved competing against males. They expressed that they felt overpowered, under-skilled and weak. Laura shares that competing against boys was intimidating and threatening, *"I didn't like playing with the boys, they made me feel bad – I was never good enough"* (Laura, 30-40). Furthermore, some participants who experienced success while competing against males felt that they had done something wrong. Anne explains, *"You don't beat a man at his own game"* (Anne, 50-60).

## **Recognition**

It is human nature to search for recognition and approval from others, as it is something we strive for, look for and at times, feeds our motivation (Brunet & Sabiston, 2011). Positive recognition and acknowledgement is motivating, gratifying and encouraging. It affirms to the participant that their effort, skill and perseverance have not gone unnoticed. On the other hand, negative acknowledgement is seen as embarrassing, discouraging and disappointing. Needless to say, being praised positively and/or negatively was something that held significant meanings for the participants.

**Positive recognition.** Many participants shared stories of a time when they were recognized for being successful while participating in physical activity. They found the recognition to hold as it supported and validated their progress and commitment within their field of sport or recreation. Some participants shared that they found meaning in receiving recognition from friends and coaches. Jamie shared that receiving recognition

for her dedication and commitment to physical activity from her coach was important, she explains “*she noticed all the hard-work I had put into my training and taking care of myself and that acknowledgment gave me more confidence to continue doing what I was doing or even work harder*” (Jamie, 20-30). Joan shared that part of her love for baseball was the reaction from the crowd:

*I love going up to bat because people could never believe I could hit the ball as far as I could. I will always remember the feeling of running, that slinging catch and feeling your body sliding on the grass and that arm extending and the weight of the ball bring it up and the roar of the crowd. (Joan, 30-40)*

Conversely, few participants found significance and meaning in the mere compliment and recognition received from a stranger.

For others it was the recognition achieved through successful competition. For example, “*that race I ended up second in my age group, and have been on the podium ever since. I mean success is somewhat addictive. I don’t compete to be mediocre I compete to win*” (Jessie, 40-50).

This recognition acted as a form of validation and confirmation for these women. Sally expressed that winning was a turning point which made competing and training more significant, “*I decided to start to compete and I started winning everything. I sort of went from nothing to everything. It was exciting and great*” (Sally, 60-70). Receiving recognition from others acted as a form of validation. These participants shared that positive recognition acted as a form of encouragement and reinforcement that continued to drive them to participate.

**Negative attention.** In contrast to the feelings gained from positive attention, is the impact of negative attention and recognition for women while participating in physical activity. Some participants expressed that having attention drawn to them for their lack of success or making a mistake was embarrassing, discouraging and hurtful. Caitlyn explains, “*Everyone was making such a big deal that I had run the wrong way. I was really embarrassed and tired. I was embarrassed because everyone knew I did something wrong*” (Caitlyn, 10-20). Participants shared that negative attention made the experience of participation very negative and made them question continuing.

### **Health and Wellness**

The health benefits associated with participation in physical activity have been publicized, broadcasted and streamed through a multitude of outlets, including medical, educational and social venues (Wakefield, Loken, & Homik, 2010). Therefore, it is no surprise that while the participants shared their experiences about their physical activity, the health benefits and the overall feeling of wellness was a theme that emerged among participants.

**Being Fit.** The idea of being “fit” was a notion that a few participants spoke to while sharing their stories. Older participants spoke to the idea that engaging in physical activity and leading an active lifestyle assisted in maintaining a ‘fit’ body. Ruth shares, “*I participate in physical activity so I stay fit and active, I enjoy the social aspect but for me my health and staying mobile is important*” (Ruth, 70-80). Having a body that was physically capable of staying active and completing daily physical tasks was something that was important to older participants. Anne talks about her transition from marathon running to taking up hot yoga,

*I knew I had to stay active once marathon running was no longer an option. I reached an age where I wasn't chasing after youth in terms of looks and appearance but I was chasing after youth in a way that allowed me to do what I wanted to do. I want to be mobile, strong, fit and capable. It is so incredibly meaningful for me to have a body that matches how I feel on the inside. (Anne, 50-60)*

Sally shared that watching the deterioration of her mother strongly impacted the importance and meaning of physical activity for her.

*When I look at my mom she wasn't an exerciser and she couldn't walk for the last parts of her life, she just sort of deteriorated so much and it was so painful to watch. I figured I would rather just keep exercising! (Sally, 60-70)*

**Feeling Good.** Participants shared how being physically active had become an integral part of their lives and being active made them feel good physically, mentally and emotionally. Laura shares, “*It's something that I love, I can't really explain it. It has just become a part of me*” (Laura, 30-40).

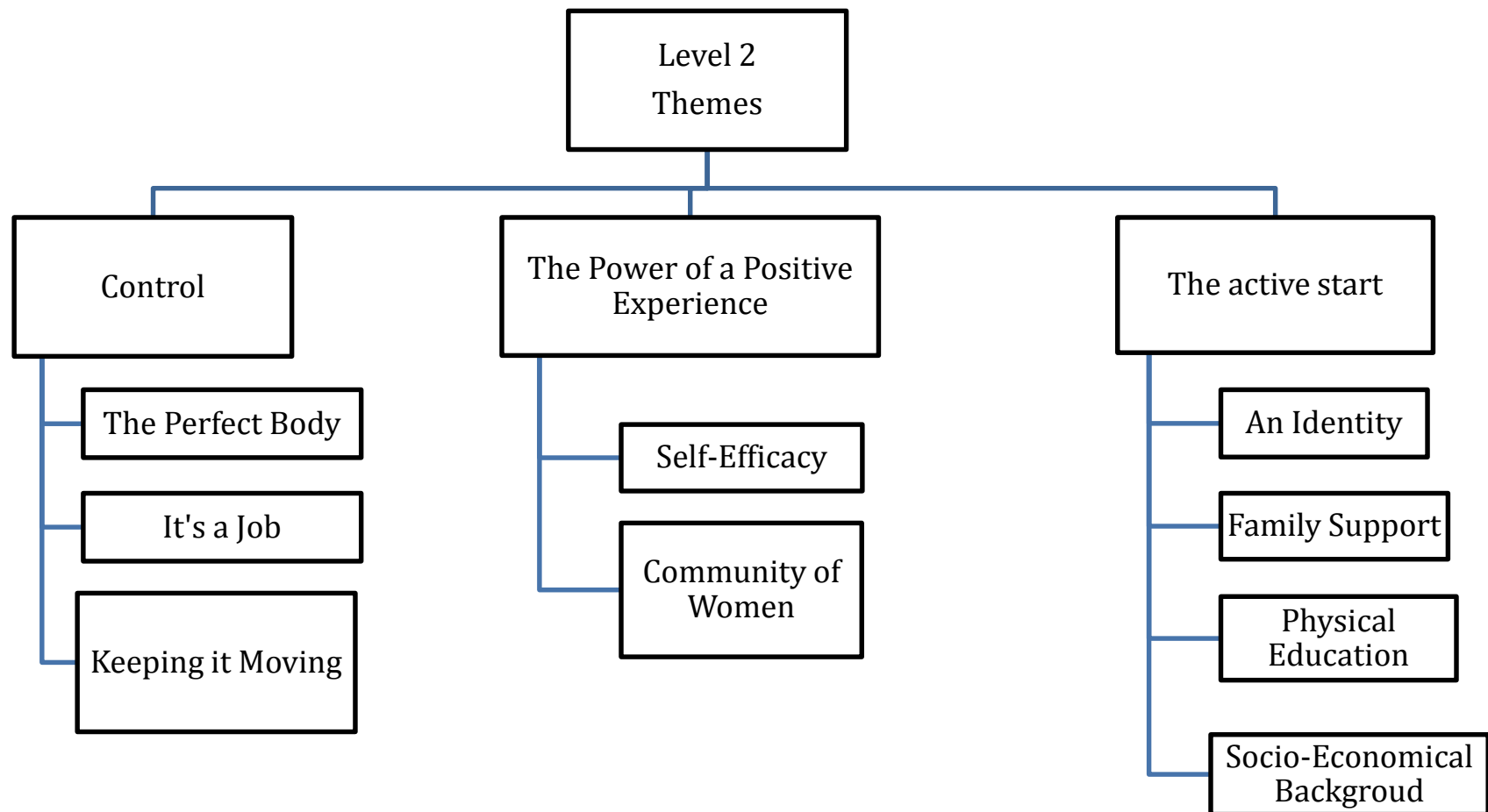
All of the participants expressed on some level that their participation with physical activity is something they enjoyed and eagerly took part in. Anne expressed, “*I feel great when I'm out being active, it clears my mind and makes me just feel good about me!*” (Anne, 50-60) It was an external outlet that made them feel good about themselves.

## **Level 2 – Elaboration**

The second round of data analysis is to “make the dubious obvious” (Patton, 2002). This approach of analysis will attempt to bring to light what embedded meanings in what was explicitly shared by participants.

The level of analysis is written to elaborate on the patterns and saliences discussed previously. As such this level of analysis will go beyond the descriptive data highlighted in level one and will focus on an interpretation of the data. This is termed 'interpretive elaboration', and is guided by the literature. Patton (2002) defines interpretation as "making sense of findings, offering explanations and drawing conclusions" (p. 480). Therefore, this level of analysis is heavily influenced by my interpretation and sensitizing concepts drawn from the literature.

**Figure 2: Level Two Themes**





## Control

An emerging theme of ‘control’ was present in the women’s stories. The idea of control was two-fold. The literature suggests that women have been faced with this dichotomy of engaging in physical activity as a form of liberation or as a form of constraint. Reischer and Koo (2004) suggest, “one’s body is a physical reflection of one’s internal capacity for commitment and self-control” (p. 309). Western society places significant emphasis on beauty as it is read through a woman’s body, “in the West, the condition of thinness had become such a widely accepted prerequisite of the body as aesthetically preferable to a corpulent one” (Reischer & Koo, 2004, p. 299). Among my participants there was an underlying sense that physical activity and exercise was being used as a form of discipline, or as a tool to control one’s body in terms of external appearance.

**The Perfect Body.** Newhall (2010) expresses the ever-present dichotomy of women’s engagement with physical activity: liberation or restriction. Participants spoke of physical activity as a form of control of their body. Bordo (1993) suggests that the body becomes a “symbol of the correct attitude, willpower, energy, control over infantile impulses, the ability to shape one’s life” (p.195). Markula (2001) explains in her research that women are constantly comparing themselves to culturally determined body ideals, and exercise is used as a tool for the attainment of the ‘perfect’ body. This notion was mostly found with younger participants. Linda explains her desire to get back to her post-pregnancy body,

*I just ballooned during my second pregnancy. I couldn’t wait to deliver and get back to what I looked like before. I use to have this great body, my bum didn’t sag*

*and my arms didn't flap around and then this extra fat just jumped on my stomach!! As soon as I was able to get back into the gym I did. I hired a personal trainer and have been committed to getting my body back. At first it was so hard and frustrating, I think I even cried about it. I worked so hard for my body and 9 months, boom it's gone! (Linda, 30-40)*

Anne shared her addiction to the scale when she was in her 30s and 40s,

*There was a point in my life where I was weighing myself every single day. When the number was lower than expected it was great, when it was higher it meant I needed to push myself a little further. You almost become a slave to that scale, it began to define me – the number on the scale. In the moment you don't realize how unhealthy it really was, that number defined my behavior throughout the day, what I ate, how I worked out and how I felt. (Anne, 50-60)*

There is abundant amount of literature that supports women's use of exercise and physical activity as a form of control or discipline for external appearances. Reischer and Koo (2004) explain discipline as "the willful work of self-deprivation in order to achieve a certain aesthetic" (p. 309). Markula (2004) suggests that the value of exercise is based on improvements in one's appearance as opposed to other benefits. Mutire and Choi (2000) suggest that exercise is often promoted to women with an emphasis on weight loss and improved muscle tone, "physical exercise is constructed as a beauty product instead of a health product" (p. 545). It is no surprise that some participants spoke of physical activity as a way to regulate their bodies, in terms of physical appearance.

**It's My Job.** The body is the vehicle in which the world is experienced and in turn the way the world initially experiences us (Bordo, 1993). A few participants worked in

the health and fitness industry. They shared stories that focused on the pressure they felt to maintain the ideal body. Reischer and Koo (2004) perhaps can help explain the pressure placed on these women by elaborating on the significance of the body, “our bodies transmit a dizzying array of complex information about ourselves, with or without our intentions and we and other member of our culture tend to be experts at reading those culturally specific meanings almost instantaneously” (p. 300).

Philips and Drummond (2001) suggest that it is not unlikely for individuals working in an industry that is focused on health and the body for those employees to begin to have an obsession on controlling their body to meet what the industry defines as the perfect body. Philips and Drummond (2001) suggest that fitness and health industries are “one in which leanness is associated with fitness and has become synonymous with health” (p.100). As such, the presentation of the body’s physical appearance is viewed as a sign of health and well-being. Alex shared her experience working as a personal trainer and the pressure to look a certain way,

*My job is based on the principles of motivating people to lead a healthier lifestyle and helping them reach their goals. But what I hear most is, ‘I want to lose weight’, ‘how can I look like you’? I exercise every day for 2 hours, and there is a part of me that does it absolutely to feel good and strong, of course. But I feel there is this pressure on me to look a certain way, and I know that exercise is a way to achieve this look. When I miss a workout I feel stressed and anxious and mostly because I think, ‘Oh God am I going to get fat?’ The funny part is I know that I’m not going to and I tell my clients all the time that rest days are so*

*important. But I hold myself to a higher standard and I think I'm partly defined by my body and it terrifies me to lose that – because then what? (Alex, 20-30)*

Similar to Alex, Joan is also involved in a job focused on the health and fitness of the body, shares her struggle with the pressure of looking the part,

*Working in this environment (health and fitness) I hate this (points to arms), I hate this (points to thighs), I hate this (points to stomach), I wish it was gone, I mean this is my environment. I know how strong I am, and I also know how healthy I am, but I also know the perception of how strong I am, and the perception of how healthy I am because of my physique. I work at getting my body back to how it was, but I don't know if I ever will. (Joan, 30-40).*

Philips and Drummond (2001) suggest that individuals working in fitness and health type industries work in an environment that is extremely focused on body shape and weight and as mentors and leaders in this field, there is a pressure to control the body to meet the body ideals of health and wellness.

**Keeping It Moving.** Participants that were most preoccupied with their external appearance were younger participants. More mature participants (50 and onwards) spoke to a time when they were younger and physical activity acted as a tool of body regulation. Interestingly there was a shift in terms of body control as women aged. There appeared to be a greater focus not on what the body looked like, but rather what the body was capable of doing. This idea of control shifted from a focus on external appearance to an internal control of what the body was capable of doing. Anne shared how her relationship with physical activity had changed over the years,

*It's funny. There became a critical point in my life when there was a shift from how I felt being more important than how I looked. I think this point came shortly after my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was sitting in yoga and I looked in the mirror and for the first time in my whole life I saw my reflection and had nothing negative to say. I was proud, I'm 50-something and here I am standing in these short-shorts and a sports bra and I thought "You go girl!" I had spent my youth going after an illusion, long lean legs, a toned tummy something and I guess you finally reach a point where that isn't going to happen. So I began to chase youth, not how I had defined it before, but rather chased youth in a way that meant I was able to do what I wanted to do. Rather than the perfect body, I wanted that blend that kept me part of the 'team'. I want to be able to move my body and so the focus on physical activity was staying involved to keep my body healthy and mobile. To me being active is simple but not simplistic, it's a moving target. (Anne, 50-60)*

Kluge (2002) supports the finding that physical activity transitions from becoming a tool of body discipline to an emphasis on improved "function and avoidance of health problems" (p.18). Joan spoke to the importance of maintaining her body for her children. However, with her chronic injury she addresses that for her, the importance is not pushing it beyond what her body is capable of, but finding that balance to ensure she is able to keep going,

*This is the body as it is. It is the vehicle for me engaging with my kids. Because of my injury (5 herniated discs) I don't get the intensity I once had because I can't, not because I don't want it, not because I don't think my heart can take it, but because I'm not willing to compromise what has already been compromised. I*

*still want to be able to play with my kids and play with my grandkids. So I have to find a balance, I can go for a walk – doesn't have to be a power walk, up and down hills. (Joan, 30-40)*

Participants in the later stages are more concerned with being able to keep the functionality of their body. Having the capabilities to use their bodies in ways they choose with no hindrance or obstacles. Physical activity is the vehicle in which they use to keep their body in motion.

### **The Power of the Experience**

Perhaps one of the greatest determinants of future participation in physical activity is the influence of previous experiences with physical activity. McAuley, Jerome, Steriani Elvsky, and Ramsey (2003) have argued that psychological outcomes experienced during physical activity participation such as enjoyment, act as a strong, or possibly the strongest indicator of one's desire to continue to participate in physical activity. Jamie shares her experience with training for the Paralympics,

*I just really enjoy it a lot (training). I love just going and doing it. It's that feeling you get deep down when you can't catch your breath, your heart is pounding but you just keep pushing. I know a lot of people are like: You're crazy why are you enjoying running?" But I love it and I just do. It's something that I love, I can't really explain it. (Jamie, 20-30).*

Bulley, et al. (2009) explains that women's perceptions and meanings of physical activity are influenced by their previous experiences. Therefore, one could presume that the more positive the experience, the greater the desire to continue to participate. Joan shares her first experience with field hockey,

*I found field hockey, and I loved it! The stick fit me, it was small, I could be fast, I could whack the hell out of it, which was great because I was so strong! I was really good from the start so I loved it, loved it, loved it! (Joan, 30-40)*

Reviews of the participants' stories seem to support the finding of Bulley, et al. (2009) in terms of the type of experience influencing future participation. Given the choice to come prepared with three meaningful stories, positive or negative in nature, all participants shared experiences that were reflective of a positive psychological outcome. This included for example: feeling good about one's accomplishments, enjoyment, feeling proud and feeling strong. Although some women shared stories of personal obstacles and injuries, they expressed that the meaning was embedded in the positive outcome achieved through physical activity. Anne shares a story of her experience running marathons and the devastating impact on her body and the transition into yoga,

*I lived to run. Every morning I got up at the crack of dawn laced up and hit the pavement. After completing a couple half marathons and then finally completing a full, my feet were shot! I knew I had to find something I loved just as much as running and gave me the satisfaction running had and then I found hot yoga. Every bit as mental as running and let me say, EVERY bit as challenging. I refused to just give up because my feet didn't want to run anymore, I still wanted the same rush I felt every time I hit the pavement and I found that with yoga, (Anne, 50-60)*

Although, not a requirement of the study, all participants expressed that they were lifelong participants of physical activity. Connecting the two outcomes, meaning developed through positive physical activity experiences and their continued pursuit of

lifelong engagement in physical activity, it could be said that the influence of one's experience is reflective in future participation as well as the values and meanings that is connected to physical activity.

McAuley et al. (2003) expresses that there is an understanding that the type of physical activity experience plays a significant role in the meanings individuals attach to that behaviour. Sally shared a story of her first time trying to bike in preparation for triathlon training,

*I remember the first time I got onto a bike, I thought 'Oh geez, here we go'. I started to pedal and it all came back to me, just like being a kid again riding a bike. Well I ended up being really good on the bike, and it didn't even take a lot of training but I just kept getting faster and faster it just seemed so natural to me. From there I was sold on biking, I loved it. (Sally, 60-70)*

Analyzing the participants' stories it became evident that through positive experiences with physical activity they associated greater value and meaning to physical activity.

**Experiencing Success.** Participants shared stories of a time in which they experienced success with their involvement in physical activity. They attached meanings to the experiences in which they received recognition from others and/or personal feelings of success and achievement. The participants shared that they found an experience meaningful if they felt they experienced success. Joan shares that one of her most meaningful experiences with physical activity during high school was scoring the game-winning goal in a field hockey championship game.



*I still have the head of my stick. So championship game, running out of time. I get a great pass, took a swing and smacked the ball right into the back of the net.*

*When I shot my stick broke, I still have the head. (Joan, 30-40)*

Jessie attached great meaning to the success she has experienced with racing,

*So I'm getting ready for my very first race, I remember just standing at the start thinking this is either going to be the best thing I've ever done or well, we will see. I had had some help with learning the transition aspect of triathlon training. You know, from swimming to biking to running. So I had some knowledge going into it, but I really had no idea. So that race I ended up second in my age group, and that was first triathlon that I did and to date I have been on the podium ever since. So that just led me down a completely different lifestyle. I was addicted to competing. I don't compete to be mediocre; I compete to win. (Jessie, 40-50)*

Tsai (2005) explains, "the higher the expectation of positive outcomes from engaging in active recreation and the more valued the outcomes, the more motivated the person is to engage in active recreation" (p. 387). This finding corresponds with the literature surrounding self-efficacy and physical activity participation. Self-efficacy is defined as "an individual's belief in his/her capability of executing the courses of action necessary to satisfy situational demands" (Sherwood & Jeffery, 2000, p. 25). Sherwood and Jeffery (2000) express that self-efficacy is "among the most consistent predictor of exercise behavior" (p. 25). As the participants shared their stories of physical activity they detailed stories of success and as such, their continued pursuit of the activity. For example, Jessie shared that following an accident filled with major physical and emotional setbacks she began to compete in speed walking. Almost immediately, she

began to experience success with the sport and she attributes that success to be what propelled her into her triathlon training.

**Community of Women.** The people with whom participants shared their physical activity experiences had significant impact on the meanings they associated with the experience. Stralen, Vries, Mudde, Bolman and Lechnera (2009) suggest that having a social network increases the likelihood of continued engagement with physical activity. Participants found meanings in the relationships they built with the peers they shared their physical activity experience. Caitlyn shared the importance having her friends with her.

*It's always more fun when my friends are with me. I have someone I can talk to and I feel more comfortable. We can be silly together. I like it a lot better when Vanessa (Caitlyn's best friend) is with me. (Caitlyn, 10-12)*

The participants' stories focused on engagement with peers and the enjoyment derived from the relationship. It appeared that a positive and encouraging relationship with exercise partners assisted in creating positive experiences and in turn developed positive meanings and association with physical activity. Cronan and Scott (2008) suggest that the relationships built with other women "enable women to give and receive support, overcome obstacles, and focus on positive and achievable goals" (p. 25). Anne expressed the importance of her workout partner while training for her marathon,

*Running was two things for me. It allowed me time to think and focus and I liked that. But twice a week I ran with one of my girlfriends and really liked that time too. We are both busy working women with little time to socialize and catch up with our girlfriends. Having that time together acted both as a motivator, as it*

*held both of us accountable, but it was also a therapy session! We both got to vent about what was bothering us, or laugh. We could relate to each other and there was something that was comforting about that. (Anne, 50-60)*

The experience participants have with physical activity is the foundation for what shapes the meanings they attach to it. Two emerging themes that most predominately influenced participants' experiences were the feeling of success and the peers with whom they experienced physical activity.

### **Active Start**

The literature indicates that an active childhood increases the likelihood of being active across the lifespan (Tammelin, Nayha, Hills, & Jarvelin, 2003). All participants in the study led an active lifestyle from childhood and onwards. Jessie expressed that it was her mother's push that led to her initial experience with physical activity,

*I was probably about 3 years old when my mom thought it was time to put me into swimming lessons. Once I started swimming you couldn't stop me, it was the beginning of the end. I was hooked after that; I never looked back, I tried everything and anything I could. (Jamie, 20-30)*

With most participants having been engaged with physical activity at some capacity since childhood, there is reason to believe that engagement with physical activity at a young age would impact an individual's meaning and value attached to physical activity. Kirk (2005) suggests that engaging in physical activity from an early age promotes the development of physical competencies that places women in a position to gain access to the physical culture of society. Participants shared that having access to physical activity from a young age acted as a catalyst to encourage and support future

involvement. Kluge (2002) suggests “the foundation of women’s lives as physically active women rests on their positive early experiences with physical activity” (p. 21).

Interpretation of participants’ stories led to three emergent themes influencing meanings on physical activity from an early age: family influences, development of one’s identity, and physical education.

**Family Influences.** Children’s values and beliefs surrounding the importance and enjoyment of physical activity are heavily influenced by parents’ perceptions (Wright, Wilson, Griffin, & Evens, 2010). As such, it is suggested that the more active lifestyle parents’ lead, children are significantly more likely also to engage in activity. Jessie shares the strong influence her father had on her desire to participate with physical activity,

*I’ve always been active, I mean I started ballet at 3. I’ve always been involved in sport and my father was an excellent, and very athletic man and I think I’ve taken after him. I mean whatever he did, he did well. So that drive to do well and compete athletically he always supported and encouraged. (Jessie, 40-50)*

Furthermore, Nielsen, Gronfeldt, Tofteganrd-Stockel and Andersen (2012) suggest that “parents’ views on the importance of their child being physically active is an indicator of the family’s attitude to the value and meaningfulness of children’s sports and physical activity” (p. 7). Participants shared stories that conveyed their family’s influence on their engagement with physical activity. Joan shares the influence of her family.

*I was always extremely active as a kid. My background was always physical because of my family. As a family we were always active, family vacations were*

*never posh, we would camp and we would hike and swim, always moving. (Joan, 30-40)*

Linda shares the influence of her father on her lifetime commitment to physical activity,

*Being introduced to physical activity at a young age, and being supported by my father to always be engaged and active. The role that my father played in supporting all physical activity endeavors is so significant in my development. I was always involved in competitive sport and was always encouraged to be active outside of those sports as well. Childhood memories are a colorful blend of physical activity experiences in every season. My father is somehow involved in almost every physical activity I have ever participated in. Spare time was rarely spent in front of a television when a football or softball could be thrown in the back yard. A game of 21 could take shape on the driveway; a bike ride could get us to the tennis courts; or skis strapped on in the forest could lead to an excellent trail. Some skills we learned together, like downhill skiing, and others he was my main supporter. Rarely did he miss an event, even in my thirties as my role changed from athlete to coach he still came and supported every team. This is so meaningful to me as a female, as his constant encouragement kept me involved in physical activity when I could have been swayed by other social pressures. It contributes to the value I place on physical activity in my life, and my family. (Linda, 30-40).*

Thompson, Humber and Mirwald (2003) support the significant role of parents by suggesting that parents hold four major roles contributing to girls' participation with activity: physical support, encouragement, financial support and role modeling.

Thompson et al. (2003) emphasize parental role modeling in particular. From the stories the participants shared it appears to support the idea that in most cases participants established meaningful experiences with physical activity at a young age through observing and mirroring of either both parents' or a parent's physical activity behavior. The relationship and meanings they associate with physical activity originated from early experiences that are most often influenced by the participants' parents.

**Development of One's Identity.** Participants shared that being active all of their lives became part of their identity. Anne shares the importance of physical activity in her life,

*Being active all my life to some extent has become a part of me. My family, my friends, even my co-workers know I go to yoga every day. I think if one day I told them I was just going to quit they would be surprised. Being active as become part of who I am, it definitely plays into my identity and how I relate to people. (Anne 50-60)*

Erikson (1971) suggests that identity is comprised of central aspects of an individual's communal culture as well as the core of the individual. Based on Erikson's (1971) understanding of identity formation, the influence of early, positive participation with physical activity helps inform these women's identities. Their experience with physical activity begins to take meaning as they associate physical activity and sport as part of how they define themselves. Alex shared her involvement with physical activity helped shape who she is,

*I was teaching a spin class, the bikes were full and it was one of those great classes – the music was great, participants were engaged and pushing it, and they were even laughing at my jokes! After our last big inhale of the cool-down. A*

*participant came up to me and said 'spin instructor Alex, personal trainer Alex, bootcamp Alex – what don't you do?' I sort of had a moment. Part of what defined who I am, was my activities. I was known for being active, but that is also how I know myself. If someone told me I couldn't be active anymore, I think big part of who I am would be gone. Oh geez! I hope to never see that day! (Alex, 20-30)*

Kluge (2002) explains that physical activity becomes embedded in that it “transcended a lifestyle choice and became their life, part of their nature – much like breathing” (p. 21).

Participation with physical activity at a young age begins to influence peer groups and activity selection and involvement, which assists in the creation of one's identity and persona (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001). For the majority of participants, physical activity is much more than a mere past time, it is ingrained in their everyday behavior. Kluge (2002) found a similar result stating; “each woman has an active pursuit that uniquely identifies her, the essence of which is embodied in who she is and what makes her tick” (p. 19). Participants within this research who shared positive early experiences with physical activity tend to value and associate positive meanings with physical activity. The active lifestyle is something that has always been engrained in them and as such forms their identity and in turn, their continued pursuit of an active lifestyle.

**Physical Education.** The school subject of physical education has been described by Tappe and Burgeson (2004) as the “cornerstone for physically active lifestyles” (p.87). Kirk (2005) suggests that for most individuals physical education is their first formal experience with physical activity and sport. The literature suggests that physical education is a fundamental building block with the intentions of promoting and educating

its students about lifelong physical activity (Kirk, 2005). Despite the literature informing the idea that physical education acts as a significant experience for girls, none of the participants in this research found significant meanings within their physical education experiences. One theory is the participants' socio-economical background.

Slater and Tiggermann (2010) perhaps offer another alternative explanation to the lack of discussion surrounding physical education as a meaningful experience. Simply put, girls find physical education boring and lack interest (Slater & Tiggermann, 2010). Humbert (2006) suggests that young people enjoy and have a desire to be physically active. However, their physical education class has a tendency to consist of “repetition of activities from one year to the next” (Humbert, 2006, p. 17). Therefore, often girls turn to activity outside of their physical education class as a source of physical activity. As such, perhaps it can be explained that physical education was not mentioned as a meaningful experience due to the fact that girls do not find physical education to be a significant experience as a result of the current climate and curriculum offered within physical education.

### **Socio-Economic Status**

Kirk (2005) argues that “there can be no question that social background, gender and disability each have a strong influence on the nature of children’s early experiences of sport” (p. 244). The socio-economic status (SES) of a family plays a significant role in determining children’s physical activity experiences and involvement (Nielsen et al., 2012). Joan acknowledged how privileged she and her family are, *“I am well aware of just how fortune I have been and my kids are. We have the opportunity to dabble in a*



*variety of activities and that is a very lucky position” (Joan, 30-40). Nielsen et al. (2012) explains the impact of family SES in further detail:*

The social-class dependent part of children’s development may explain why dispositions and resources, and hence interests, possibilities, competencies and praxis, including sports and other physical activities, are different in different positions in the social stratum of society: they are reproductions of an individual’s socio-economic background. (p. 3)

Therefore, children from higher socio-economic background have access to resources and opportunities in terms of organized sport and physical activity that children from lower socio-economical families do not (Wright et al., 2010).

Physical education is the first formal experience with physical activity and sport for most individuals (Kirk, 2005). However, perhaps this statement holds more truth for children of a lower SES as they more likely lack the resources to access organized sport. Participants in this research did not view physical education as a meaningful physical activity experience because they had the opportunity to participate in formal sport and physical activity outside of school. Participants spoke to experiences that were reflective of organized sport, including soccer and swimming lessons.

Participants participating in this study all spoke to physical activity experiences throughout life that were attached to organized activity including swimming, triathlons, yoga, soccer, and dance. The results of this research as it relates to physical activity, participants’ SES plays a significant role in the type of experiences they have with physical activity and as such the meanings they attach to those experiences.

### Level 3 - The Unarticulated

#### The 'Lived Body'

The body is the vehicle in which each physical activity is initially experienced and as such is fundamental to the meanings participants attach to their experiences. Duesend and Skarderud (2003) explain the value of the body,

The body is our primary instrument for understanding. The experience precedes the analysis of the experiences. The un-reflected comes prior to the reflection. Experiences are created in a bodily encounter and in reflections about this bodily encounter. The expressing and the creating body is the very 'site' for development. (p. 57)

Therefore, analyzing and understanding participants' experiences through an existential phenomenological lens can add significant value. Thorpe and Holt (2008) define existential phenomenology as:

Describing subjective human experience as it reflects people's values, purposes, ideals, intentions, emotions, and relationships. Existential phenomenology concerns itself with the experiences and actions of the individual, rather than conformity or behavior. The individual is seen as an active and creative subject, rather than an object in nature: in other words, the existential person is not merely passive or reactive, subject to environmental influences, but also a purposeful being who has inner experiences and can interpret the meanings of his or her existence and relationships with others in a social world. (p.153)

The lived body as defined by Young (2005) explains

The body as lived is always enculturated: by the phonemes a body learns to pronounce at a very early age, by the clothes the person wears that mark her

nation, her age, her occupational status, and in what is culturally expected or required of women. (p.17)

Therefore the body is not objective but rather subjective, “an experiencing and experienced unity” (Duesund & Skarderud, 2003, p. 57). This level of analysis intends to understand the ‘lived body’ and how it contributes to the meanings of participants’ physical activity experiences.

With the body being the means through which we experience the world, which is magnified during physical activity, it was surprising that participants’ stories did not capture a more detailed presence of their bodies. The voice of the body seemed to have been lost or muffled by perhaps what women viewed as the ‘bigger’ picture; scoring the winning goal, overcoming a personal obstacle or injury, and/or with whom the activity was experienced. However, the female body is biologically and culturally complex. From birth until old age, some women are faced with multiple changes to their bodies, from discovering the mystery of menstruation, to growing breasts, getting pregnant, gaining weight, losing weight, wrinkles, breast feeding, gaining muscle, losing muscle, getting pimples, getting hips, to menopause. Not only do women have to negotiate with a multitude of body changes throughout their lives; these changes are placed in the spotlight and scrutinized by society.

Some women have experienced a range of emotions and feelings about their bodies. At times they can feel strong and empowered by our bodies and its capabilities, other times some women have felt ‘fat’, insecure and perhaps just dying to crawl out of our skin. Some women have had days where they can stand in the mirror and are proud of what they see or maybe have days they look at themselves and dissect each part of

their body. Women can spend hours upon hours analyzing their bodies; how they look, how they move, why people are looking at them, why people are not looking at them, how they feel, that freckle that was not there before, the first white strand of hair or an ingrown toenail that hurts every step taken.. Entangled within the ever-present idea of the body is physical activity. Each female has her own reasons attached to why she engages in physical activity, however; the body is always present and involved within that experience.

As women age they might start to notice subtle changes in their bodies – their faces have a few more laugh lines, their breasts do not sit quite as high, their stomachs, and hips, and thighs are not as small as they used to be. For some physically active female the body changes throughout life are perhaps magnified. The movements that were once routine might have become a little less fluent, warming up the body for a workout takes twice the amount of time, the 3 mile short distance run has become the distance run and their body's aches and pains seem a little more exaggerated. Attached to these changes might be feelings of frustration as their body's performance level begins to decline and its composition begins to change. However, some women also embrace the aging body as the changes represent a life lived, full of adventure and activity. The mere fact of still being active and engaging the body is one that is admired and honored by some participants.

Despite the overwhelming presence of the body in participants' everyday world there was a lack of a voice of the body in participants' stories. I believe there are reasons to explain the lack of discussion surrounding the body in participants' physical activity stories. For example, from an early age most participants are taught through cultural

norms that the body is an object. They wear pretty dresses, their moms do our hair in bows, they are not encouraged to go jumping and running when dressed up. Literally, from birth most women are conditioned to view their body as an object, something to show and tell – usually for the male gaze. As such, it becomes almost taboo for participants to discuss the ‘messy’ parts of our body: getting their period, gaining weight, and wrinkles. The most predominant voice of the body shared in participants’ stories was the objectified body.

McKinley (1999) describes the objectified body as, “viewing one’s body as an outside observer” (p. 761). McKinley (1999) suggests that the objectified body begins at an early age,

Girls learn quite early that they are evaluated for how they look, and they come to experience their own bodies in terms of how they look to others, rather than, for example, how they feel or what they can do. (p. 761)

Therefore, it is not surprising as this is most likely what participants feel most comfortable talking about, as we have grown up conditioned to be conscious of our appearances rather than perhaps anything else.

Western culture in particular has developed a sense of a new body, one which is no longer focused solely on the biological features and factors, but rather the body has developed into a medium to express appearance and a focus on impressions left on others (Csordas, 1994). Participants in this research ranging from age 20-50 reflected on their bodies but the focus was extremely appearance driven with an emphasis on the perception and impressions their body represented within society. Linda (30-40) shared “*I had this physique that got me noticed, muscular, but not too muscular, lean and thin. That’s what*

*you want*”. Perhaps it can be understood that through her lived body experiences having a body that conforms to society’s definition of ‘beautiful’ body allowed her to receive more positive attention. Her lived experiences through the body were most likely ones that were reflective and conducive to ideal images of society. She received positive attention; shopping was most likely a positive experience as clothes were most likely designed to fit her physique; her firm lean body was representative in today’s western society as someone who works hard and is focused. Evans (2003) suggests that society associates the thin, toned female body with positive life success. Furthermore, she was careful to add in her story that she was not “*too muscular*”, leaving one to assume that being ‘too muscular’ would be associated with maleness – which result in negative impressions and as such a different lived body experience.

After her second pregnancy, Linda’s body changed and she shared her frustrations with her new body, “*At first it was so hard and frustrating, I think I even cried about it.*” Her lived body had completely changed, how she experienced the world and how the world perceived and experienced her was no longer what it had been. Upton and Han (2003) suggest that the fact women struggling to regain their pre-pregnancy bodies is suggestive of a larger element of trying to recapture and regain their sense of identity and self within society. As such, it could be understood that the meanings of physical activity became the tool that assisted in her regaining her pre-pregnancy body. But perhaps even more so it was the experiences of her lived body pre-pregnancy that she strived for.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

The meanings participants associate with physical activity is an ever changing, complicated, entangled and negotiated relationship. This research intended to explore the meanings that physically activity participants associate with physical activity across their lifespans; and the implications that can be made from the stories the participants shared. This chapter provides a summary of the major findings, and the implications of the results.

#### **Major Findings**

Participants in this research were asked to come to the interview prepared to share three meaningful stories, (positive or negative) that held significant meanings. As the participants shared their stories, recurring themes and patterns of meaning were embedded across their stories. Supported by research, it was clear that participants found significant meanings in the relationships they built amongst other participants; coaches and community members involved within their physical activity experiences. Participants shared that their desire to be active was partly due to the relationships built with other women and their family's influence. The social interaction and support participants received and gained from others had great meanings and significance.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings was the influence of a positive early experience with physical activity. Although not a criteria of the study, all participants were lifelong participants of physical activity. The participants did not explicitly share that an early experience with physical activity held significant value. However through

analysis of their stories I was able to infer that early positive experiences held significant meanings and in turn appeared to lead to continued participation. The participants' families played a substantial role in encouraging and supporting participants' early engagement with physical activity. The majority of participants spoke to early positive experiences with physical activity and included in their stories the role of their parents in being the catalyst to their participation. This indicated to me that participants in this study were most likely reflective of a social class that allowed and gave way to the opportunity for participation in organized sport as a child. The participants shared that their love for being active stemmed from childhood and continued throughout their lives. Bulley, et al. (2009) explains that women's perceptions of and meaning given to physical activity are influenced by their previous experiences. As such, it is logical to conclude that early experiences with physical activity, positive or negative, will have a strong influence on the meanings participants associate with physical activity and in turn their continued participation.

As participants spoke to their early experiences with physical activity it was interesting that none spoke of any experiences with physical education. All participants shared stories that focused primarily on organized sports. Despite the literature informing the idea that physical education acts as a significant experience for girls, no participant attached significant meanings to their physical education experiences (Kirk, 2005). This led me to believe that socio-economic status plays a significant role in these women's first experience with physical activity. Participants of higher socio-economic status are more likely to have alternative first experiences, rather than physical education. Participants were most likely representative of a social class with a disposable income



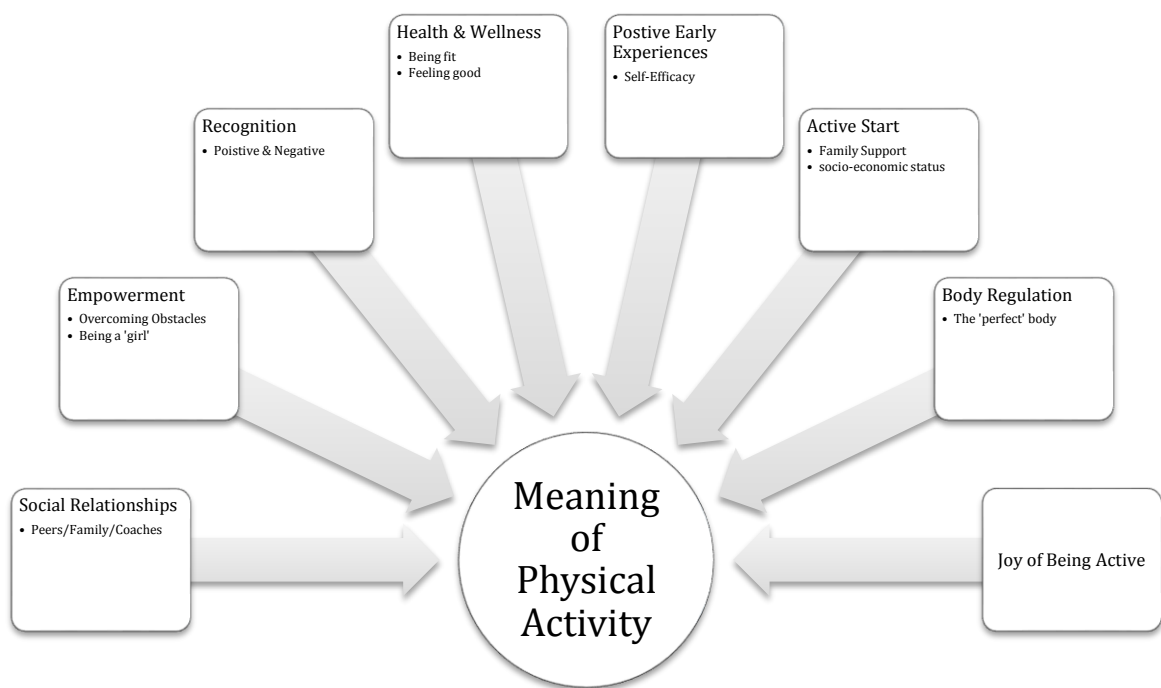
that provides access to participation in organized sports and activities. Or alternatively, perhaps physical education is not offering a curriculum that creates an exciting and memorable experience for its female participants.

Pfister (2010) shares perhaps the most commonly viewed perception of women and sport and exercise, “from the very beginning women in sport were the ‘other sex’; they were outsiders, new – or latecomers who, if they were allowed to at all, could take part in ‘suitable’ forms of exercise and sport” (p. 234). The results of this research indicate that this perhaps this is a dated perception of women’s involvement in sport. Through the analysis of participants’ stories it appears to support Malin’s (2010) discussion of a movement that encourages and supports participants’ engagement and participation in physical activity as a form of strength, independence and empowerment. There were slight undertones in participants’ stories that supported ideologies of physical activity being a tool used to discipline and oppress women. However there also appeared to be a much more positive and encouraging message in participants’ stories. Through physical activity participants shared that they felt empowered, strong, healthy and successful. They shared that they found meaning in the health benefits and the overall positive feelings they associated with physical activity.

The last major finding is perhaps better explained as what was not articulated. Participants’ stories seemed to have a heavy emphasis and focus on the ‘bigger’ picture ideas of physical activity – scoring the winning goal, overcoming a physical burden and/or the social experience. Perhaps, those ‘big’ picture ideas are most representative of male hegemony within our Western society that places significant value and importance on winning and success. Therefore, the voice of the body within most participants’ stories

was not very prominent. The meaning of experiences is sometimes found in the small details of the story, however I believe that the big picture overshadowed the small details. The body was often only represented as the objective body, which Mckinley (1999) describes as viewing the body as an outsider. I believe this is most likely explained as a result of today's culture and predominant ideologies of thinking and viewing the female body. Western society has become conditioned to speak of the body as both a work in progress, addressing our flaws and imperfections and/or not discuss it at all.

Figure 3: Summary of the meanings participants associate with physical activity



### Implications

This research looked to explore the meanings active participants attribute to their physical activity experiences. The meanings participants attribute to physical activity can assist in understanding what participants may value in terms of physical activity and

assist in promoting aspects of physical activity that may lead to female participation in lifelong physical activity.

All identified themselves as being lifelong physical activity participants and expressed that their positive childhood experiences had significant value. Furthermore, many attributed their families' pursuit of an active lifestyle to be a direct link to their initial participation with physical activity. These findings suggests that not only do young participants need to experience success and have an initial positive experiences with physical activity, there also needs to be an emphasis on family education and providing families with the resources that support and advocate an active lifestyle.

The women involved in this research all connected the social relationships they developed through their participation in physical activity as extremely meaningful and significant. They valued the connection and support of other women and appreciated the social environment. For many, the relationships built and the feeling of belonging was a significant factor that encouraged continued participation. Creating a social, supportive and inclusive environment is fundamental to women's participation in physical activity.

Through listening to the women share their stories it became evident that the idea of the 'ideal' female body is ever present. These women are still striving to meet a predefined definition of beauty through physical activity and exercise. The pressure to conform and represent this figure designed by society is still engraved in the habits and tasks that women uptake in an attempt to meet these feminine ideals. Physical activity acted as tool to control ones weight and shape ones body in an effort to be 'beautiful'.

Lastly, the participants all supported the trend that encourages, embraces and promotes participants' empowerment through physical activity, sport and exercise. For

participants in this research physical activity seemed to be a fundamental component of their identity and way these women expressed themselves.

### Limitations

There are limitations that should be taken into consideration when reading this document. My first concern is the use of the word ‘meaning’ when asking participants to select physical activity experiences. Participants did not seem to understand what was meant by the word ‘meaningful’ or ‘meaning’. There was confusion regarding what classified as a ‘meaningful’ story, and as a result some participants were ill prepared for the sharing of stories. In hindsight, the letter of invitation should have provided participants with a more detailed definition of what constitutes a ‘meaningful experience’. I should have provided examples or more information prior to the interview to ensure that the participants had an understanding of the aim of the research.

I believe that due to lack of understanding with the term ‘meaning’, some participants did not come prepared with three stories to share, or they struggled to articulate the significance of the story. If I repeated this research I might have participants write down their stories to help ensure that they have taken the time to think through the significance of their stories and their deeper meanings. Also, a standard interview guide outlining specific questions to probe participants regarding their understanding of why the story is significant and meaningful would be beneficial and would apply more rigor to this approach.

**Interview skills.** I think that my interview skills may have been underdeveloped for the method of phenomenological interviews. More effective questioning from a more

experienced interviewer could have provided participants with a springboard to a deeper reflective and insights into their experiences.

Most participants focused on the ‘big’ picture of their physical activity experiences, and the more tangible benefits. During the interviews participants did not all deconstruct the experience to search for deeper, more profound meanings. Many participants may have shared what they thought I wanted to hear, which again may be the result of my interview skills. Perhaps had I been better able to interview participants I could have focused my questioning on gaining a more intimate and detailed description of the experience.

**Analysis.** The first level of analysis provides readers with what participants explicitly said. The recurring themes found within that level of analysis were very mainstream, highly researched and supported themes. Although, the stories most likely were representative of a meaningful experience, they lacked depth and insights into the entirety of the experience. Participants did break down the experience from beginning to end explaining vivid details, however they were missing feeling and movements in terms of their lived body experiences.

**Sampling.** Perhaps the most significant limitation was my selection of participants. It appeared that the majority of participants were drawn from middle to upper class socio-economic status and as such their experiences with physical activity were somewhat homogenous. It would have benefited the research had I sought participants from more diverse backgrounds in race, class, sexual orientation and culture; expanding my participant search beyond my peers and family acquaintances. This would have provided

the research with more breadth in my search to understand the meanings women attribute to physical activity across a broader range of participants.

### **Future Directions**

**First Experiences.** Based on the results of this research it would be of value to investigate participants' memories of their first few experiences with physical activity as an indicator of future participation. The nature of participants' first experiences with physical activity may be an indication or prediction of future participation. This research has potential to highlight the importance of providing young participants with positive experiences that allow them to experience success in a safe and inclusive environment to encourage continued participation.

**Socio Economic Status.** It would be of interest to examine participants' experience with physical activity in relation to their socio economic status. Participants in this research all represented middle to upper class bracket and as such their experiences seemed to be rather homogenous. Participants participating in this research all had access to organized sport and exercise as a result of their class. Placing quotas on SES within this research, ensuring adequate representation, would provide more breadth and insights into the meanings women attribute to physical activity and are more representative of the Canadian female population.

**Physical Education.** Participants did not share that they found significant meanings in their physical education experiences, which is supported by the literature (Humbert, 2006). Investigating the current climate of physical education for girls across their education might be of value to assist in further explaining women's lifelong participation in physical activity.

Investigating the current pedagogical methods and practices might be of value in creating an environment in which girls feel personally involved and invested. Based on the results of this study summarized on page 106 there are a few suggestion that could be incorporated in the pedagogical practices of teachers that might help develop meaningful physical education experiences. It became clear in this research that body image and perception is still very much focused and defined by a society's' definition of body perfection. Teachers need to acknowledge this and make their student aware of this. Teaching practices need to include this idea and bring it forward within their lessons.

Participants in this study highlighted the significant of positive experiences experienced through the success of a skill. However, success was significant when it was challenging and sense of accomplishment was felt. Teachers need to create an environment, which allows students to find a balance between finding challenge and experiencing success.

Perhaps most significantly is allowing and guiding students towards a sense of autonomy. Allowing girls to have a voice and providing opportunities that are unique and novel to girls. Lastly, provide and encourage a social connection. Provide opportunities for girls to interact, encourage and support one another.

**Lived Body.** Lastly, research that investigates participants' experiences with their lived bodies and physical activity could provide greater insight into gaining a more in depth understanding of the totality of their experience. Therefore, asking participants more specifically to share their physical activity experiences based on their body experience.

### Reflection

Being new to the research world, this experience as a whole provided multiple opportunities for my learning, growth and development as a researcher. Although eye-opening and exciting, it was really what was *not* present in my research that was the profound. I went into this thesis excited to understand what women find meaningful about physical activity, hopeful that using phenomenology would provide insight into the detail of each woman's experience with physical activity. But as the participants shared their stories I became aware of the homogeneity of my participants, in terms of social class and in turn their experiences.

Prior to conducting this research I was extremely naïve to that fact that the realm of physical activity, exercise and sport as defined and understood in Western society is representative of a white middle to upper class cohort. My ignorance to this idea is most likely explained by the fact that I am representative and fit comfortably into this defined group. Physical activity as it is widely understood, addresses the privileged that can experience physical activity and exercise as a form of leisure activity. Being able to partake in physical activity as a way to shape one's body, for the social setting, or for the joy of moving is a privilege, experienced by few and denied by many.

The following experience took place recently while emerged in this research. Going through this experience and listening to the participants' stories, I have become much more reflective in my own physical activities both how I feel physical, mentally and emotionally. I have started to become more aware of the presents of my lived body and my experiences through my own body.



*I have participated in few hot yoga classes; not one to reveal a lot of skin I came wearing tights and a tank-top. The girl beside me (a tall, lean, attractive woman) was wearing short yoga shorts and a sports bra. Needless to say I felt out of place. Standing, waiting for the class to begin, I was already dripping sweat and was uncomfortable just lying motionless in the heat. We started the class and the first position was one that required me to bring one leg parallel to the floor, hold it in my hands while I extended my leg. I could not even balance on one foot; every time I would bring my leg up I would wobble and then drop my leg to regain my balance. Beads of sweat were dripping down onto my mat and my hands were so sweaty I could hardly grab onto my foot without it sliding out. Trying to touch my toe was not going to happen! Looking to my right the woman was moving so effortlessly and the movements were controlled and balanced. Looking at her, I would have thought it was a comfortable temperature and she was moving through a series of relaxing stretches. I was frustrated with my body; I wanted to be able to move with ease like her. As I continued to look over to my right throughout the class, I started to compare what I looked like to her – firstly, I seemed hugely uncoordinated and secondly I felt overweight and gross standing next to her. My experience of this yoga class was most likely completely different through my lived body experience than the woman standing next to me.*

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## **Appendix A**

### **Email Correspondence**

Dear (potential participant),

Thank you for your interest in this research. I have attached a letter of invitation and the informed consent form. Please read over both forms, and should you agree to participate please sign the informed consent and bring it with you for our interview session. We will go over the informed consent form together and address any questions.

Participation in this study will take no more than an hour of your time and will be audiotaped. Please let me know a meeting time that works best for your availability.

Thank you again for your interest and participation in this research. Should you have any further questions, do not hesitate to contact me. Looking forward to talking with you.

Jane Lovett

## Appendix B

### Letter of Invitation

January 10, 2013

**Title of Study:** Physical Activity and the Entanglement of Meaning Making for ß

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Nancy Francis, Professor, Kinesiology, Brock University

**Student Principal Investigator:** Jane Lovett, MA Candidate, Faculty of Applied Health Sciences, Brock University

I, Jane Lovett, student principal investigator of this research project, from Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled Physical Activity and the Entanglement of Meaning Making for Females.

The purpose of this study is to assist in understanding the meaning women ascribe to physical activity through the use of stories. This research hopes to gain an understanding of why active women across their life span continue to engage in physical activity, rather than focusing on why inactive women remain inactive. As such, it is important that participants are currently physically active. Women will be considered physically active with participation in any intentional activity that encompasses a moderate to vigorous activity level at least once a week.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Should you choose to decline participation in the study it will not impact my ability to successfully complete the research or obtain my degree. Potential participants are by no means obligated to partake in the study and should you choose to withdraw at anytime there will be no consequences.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to share three significant stories of your physical activity experiences across your life. These stories can be positive or negative in nature and can have occurred throughout any point in your life. However, the success of this project is embedded in the idea that you choose stories that have significant meaning to you. As such, stories need to be reflective about a time you personally were engaged in physical activity. The stories you choose to share can be long or short in durations as long as they signify experiences that are meaningful for you.

The expected duration is a one time, 1-hour commitment. The sharing of stories will be audiotaped.

The use of women's stories to uncover the meaning connected to their physical activity experiences will assist in a deeper understanding of women's relationship with physical activity. Gaining new insight into the value women place on their physical activity can assist in informing new intervention strategies, programs, creating successful, positive experiences for females across their life span.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca))

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you

**Dr. Nancy Francis**  
**Professor**  
 [905] 668 - 5550 ext. 4366  
[nfrancis@brocku.ca](mailto:nfrancis@brocku.ca)

**Jane Lovett**  
**MA Candidate**  
 [289] 668 - 5509  
[jl06hy@brocku.ca](mailto:jl06hy@brocku.ca)

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [12-104].

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent

Date: January 10, 2013

Project Title: Physical Activity and the Entanglement of Meaning Making for Females

Principal Investigator (PI): Dr. Nancy Francis, Professor  
Department of Kinesiology  
Brock University  
905- 668- 5550 ext. 4366; [nfrancis@brocku.ca](mailto:nfrancis@brocku.ca)

Student Principal Investigator (SPI): Jane Lovett,  
MA Candidate  
Department of Applied Health Sciences  
Brock University

#### **INVITATION**

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to assist in understanding the meaning women ascribe to physical activity through the use of stories. The researcher hopes to gain an understanding of why active women across their life span continue to engage in physical activity, rather than focusing on why inactive women remain inactive.

#### **WHAT'S INVOLVED**

As a participant, you will be asked to come prepared to share three significant stories that are reflective of your physical activity experiences across your life. These stories can be positive or negative in nature and can have occurred throughout any point of your life. However, the success of this project is embedded in the idea that you choose stories that have significant meaning to you. As such, stories need to be reflective about a time you personally were engaged in physical activity. The stories you choose to share can be long or short in durations as long as they signify experiences that are meaningful for you. Once you have shared your stories, questions may be asked by the researcher to probe for further meaning and understanding. Questions will be used to gain a more in depth understanding the meaning you associate with each physical activity experience. Participation will take approximately 1 hour of your time and the process will be audiotaped.

#### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

The use of women's stories to uncover the meaning connected to their physical activity experiences will assist in a deeper understanding of women's relationship with physical activity. Gaining new insight into the value women place on their physical activity can assist in informing new intervention strategies, programs, creating successful, positive experiences for females across their life span. Furthermore, participation in this study will act as an outlet for women to safely discuss their feelings towards their experiences with physical activity.

There is the potential risk for participants to experience psychological risks. However, participants will not be asked anything that warrants a response that may lead to psychological risks. Although, due to the nature of the topic some participants may reflect on emotional or stressful experiences. The participants will be made aware that all participation is voluntary and if they are uncomfortable with any questions they can choose to decline answering that questions. They will be provided with contact information for student health services at Brock University and Distress Centre Niagara if they experience any distress.

Due to the relationship between the participant and researcher there is potential social risk, that information shared will impact the personal relationship. Participants will be reminded that information they choose to disclose to the researcher is at their own discretion and will have no influence or consequences on the personal relationship.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information you provide is considered confidential; your name will not be included or, in any other way, associated with the stories and information (data) collected in the study.

The information (data) collected during this study will be stored in password-protected files on password-protected computers in locked offices on Brock University's campus. The data will be stored until the principal student investigator has defended her thesis (August/September 2013) and then will be kept for five years in order to produce further publications. After this point data will be destroyed (i.e. confidential shredding and deletion of electronic files).

Access to this data will be restricted to the principal student investigator and her faculty supervisor.

#### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Should you choose to decline participation in the study it will have no impact on the ability of the researcher to successfully complete the research project or obtain their degree. You are by no means obligated to partake in the study and should you choose to withdraw at anytime their will be no consequences. Furthermore, it is to your own discretion what you choose to disclose to the researcher.

#### **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. If you wish to receive a final report of this research, the principal student investigator will send you an electronic copy in September 2013.

#### **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Dr. Nancy Frances or Jane Lovett using the contact information provided previously. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [12-104]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

#### **CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Appendix D

### Assent Informed Consent

Date: November 7, 2012

Project Title: Physical Activity and the Entanglement of Meaning Making for Females

Principal Investigator (PI): Dr. Nancy Francis, Professor  
Department of Kinesiology  
Brock University  
905- 668- 5550 ext. 4366; [nfrancis@brocku.ca](mailto:nfrancis@brocku.ca)

Student Principal Investigator (SPI): Jane Lovett,  
MA Candidate  
Department of Applied Health Sciences  
Brock University

#### **INVITATION**

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to help me understand the meaning girls and women have about physical activity. Through you sharing stories with me, I hope to gain an understanding of why active women across their life span continue to engage in physical activity.

#### **WHAT'S INVOLVED**

As a participant, you will be asked to come prepared to share three significant stories that tell me about your physical activity experiences in your life. These stories can be positive or negative and can have occurred throughout any point of your life. However, the success of this project depends on the idea that you choose stories that have meaning to you. As such, stories need to be about a time you were engaged in physical activity. The stories you choose to share can be long or short. Once you have shared your stories, I may ask you questions to make sure I understand your story and how you felt about what happened. This will take about 1 hour of your time and we will be audiotaped. You will have the choice if you would like your parents to be present throughout the interview.

#### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

Your stories and the stories of other women of different ages will help me understand the meaning connected to physical activity. This will help us understand how we can improve physical activity program for girls and women so that they remain active in their life. You do not have to tell me anything you do not want to and if a story you tell me makes you feel bad or sad you don't have to answer my questions. If you were really upset your parents or I would help you by finding someone for you to talk to (Pathstone Mental Health).

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information you provide is confidential; your name will not be used in any of the stories. The information (data) collected will be stored in password-protected files on password-protected computers in locked offices on Brock University's campus. The data will be stored until I have defended my thesis (August/September 2013) and then will be kept for five years in order to produce further publications. After this point data will be destroyed (i.e. confidential shredding and deletion of electronic files).

Access to this data will be restricted to my professor and I.

#### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Should you choose to not participate or drop out of the study it will be okay because I can still finish my degree.

### **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. If you wish to receive a final report of this research, I will send you an electronic copy in September 2013.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Dr. Nancy Francis or Jane Lovett using the contact information provided previously. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [12-104]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

### **CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name of Child: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Child Signature: \_\_\_\_\_